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PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

A monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order
started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896



November 2011

Vol. 116, No. 11

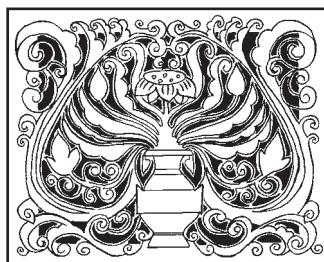


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Vol. 116, No. 11
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Amrita Kalasha

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Contents

Traditional Wisdom	663
This Month	664
<i>Editorial: Worship of the Age</i>	665
Vivekananda and His Seafaring Vessels	667
<i>Somenath Mukherjee</i>	
Puranas: Spirituality for the Masses	672
<i>Swami Samarpanananda</i>	
Kodungalloor Bhagavati Kali Temple	679
<i>Santi Prasad Ghosal</i>	
Women's Status in Buddhism	682
<i>Dr Chenchulakshmi Kolla</i>	
Relevance of the Mahabharata	687
<i>Dr Narendra Kohli</i>	
Kumbha Mela:	694
<i>Drawing Devout Millions</i>	
<i>Swami Nirgunananda</i>	
Sri Ramakrishna:	699
The 'New Man' of the Age – IV	
<i>Swami Bhajanananda</i>	
Reviews	705
Reports	708

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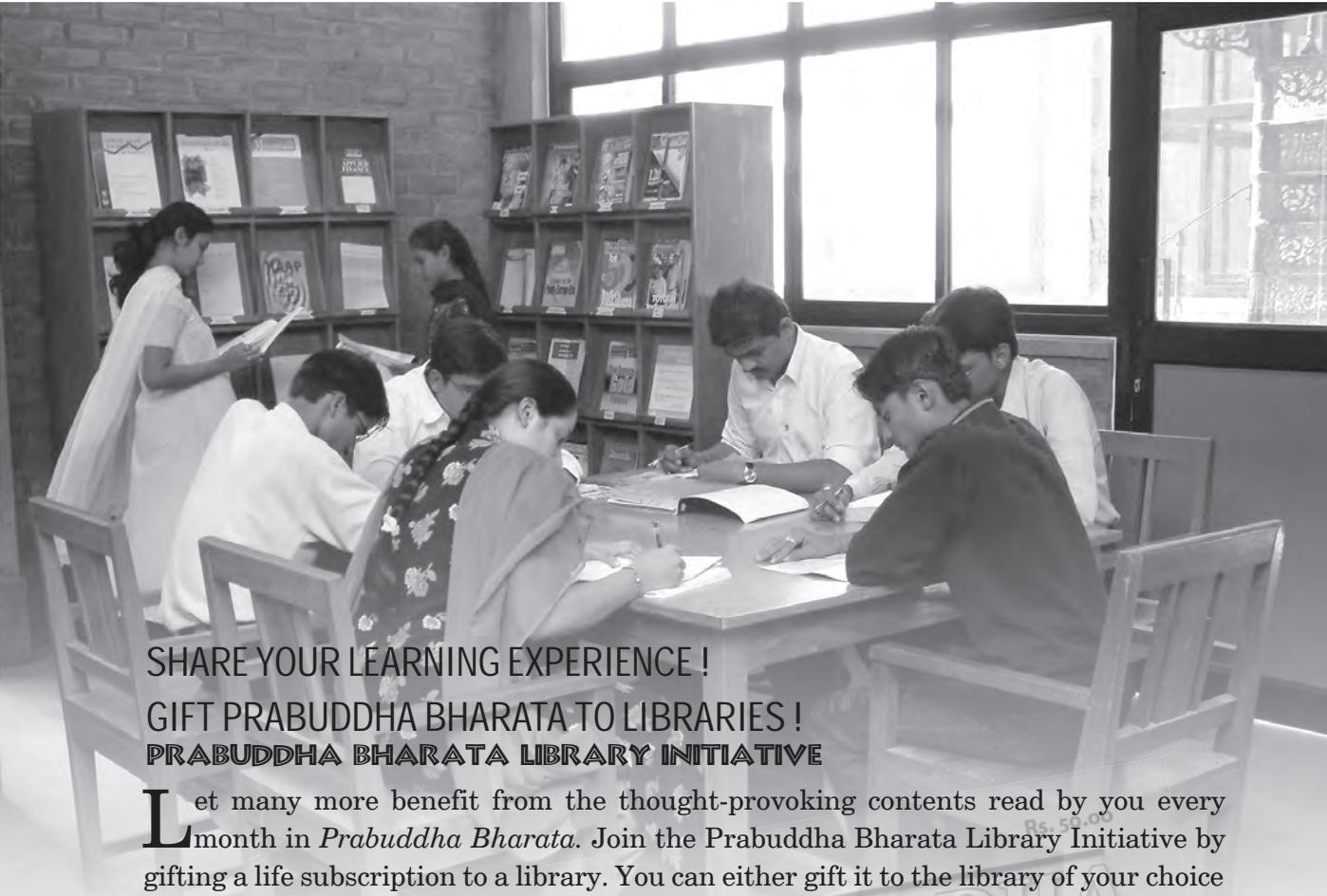
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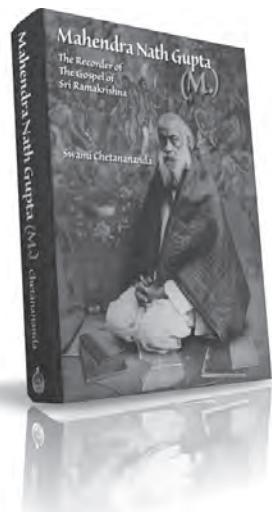
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MAHENDRA NATH GUPTA (M.)

by Swami Chetanananda

This is a biography of the biographer of Sri Ramakrishna, Mahendra Nath Gupta, the self-effacing author of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* who craved no accolades, at last emerges from the shadows. Burdened with financial obligations and continuous family discord, Gupta became nearly suicidal. Grace and desperation led him to Ramakrishna, the unconventional temple priest at Dakshineswar who became his guru. By the close of his life Gupta was recognized as a saint in his own right, his life transmuted by the spiritual master whose activities he observed so closely and reported so vividly.

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उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राय वरान्निबोधत । *Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!*



The City of Brahman

November 2011
Vol. 116, No. 11

दहं विपाप्य परमेऽश्मभूतं यत्पुण्डरीकं पुरमध्यसङ्ख्यम् ।
तत्रापि दहं गगनं विशोकं तस्मिन् यदन्तस्तदुपासितव्यम् ॥

In the citadel of the body there is the small sinless and pure lotus of the heart which is the residence of the supreme. Further in the interior of this small area there is the sorrowless space. That is to be meditated upon continually.

(Mahanarayana Upanishad, 12.16)

ॐ अथ यदिदमस्मिन्ब्रह्मपुरे दहरं पुण्डरीकं वेशम् दहरोऽस्मिन्नन्तरा-
काशस्तस्मिन्यदन्तस्तदन्वेष्टव्यं तद्वाव विज्ञासितव्यमिति ॥

Om! Then, in this small lotus-like dwelling that is within the city of Brahman, there is a small space. That which exists in that space is to be known. That indeed has to be enquired into for realization.

(Chhandogya Upanishad, 8.1.1)

यः सर्वज्ञः सर्वविद्यस्यैष महिमा भुवि ।
दिव्ये ब्रह्मपुरे ह्येष व्योम्यात्मा प्रतिष्ठितः ॥
मनोमयः प्राणशरीरनेता प्रतिष्ठितोऽन्ने हृदयं सन्निधाय ।
तद्विज्ञानेन परिपश्यन्ति धीरा आनन्दरूपममृतं यद्विभाति ॥

That [Atman] which is omniscient in general and all-knowing in detail and which has such glory in this world is seated in the space within the luminous city of Brahman. It is conditioned by the mind; it is the carrier of the vital forces and the body; it is seated in food by placing the intellect (in the cavity of the heart). Through their knowledge, discerning people realize that [Atman] as existing in its fullness everywhere—the Atman that shines surpassingly as blissfulness and immortality.

(Mundaka Upanishad, 2.2.7)

THIS MONTH

Down the ages the worship of God has taken many forms according to people's spiritual needs. Humanity today is veering towards the worship of Virat, which is **The Worship of the Age**.



faring Vessels Somenath Mukherjee, Researcher, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, presents Swamiji's travel on the *Peninsular*.

Mythology is innate to human thought and culture, and in India this body of literature has existed from antiquity. In **Puranas: Spirituality for the Masses** Swami Samarpanananda of the Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University, Belur, discusses the relevance and role of the Puranas.

The ancient **Kodungalloor Bhagavati Kali Temple** in Kerala was probably the only temple into which Swami Vivekananda was not allowed to enter. Santi Prasad Ghosal, who was a researcher at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, describes the temple's history and legends.



Whatever Swami Vivekananda did has become sacred and spiritual history as well. In the first part of **Vivekananda and His Sea-faring Vessels** Somenath Mukherjee, Researcher, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, presents Swamiji's travel on the *Peninsular*.

Dr Chenchulakshmi Kolla, Department of Philosophy, Sri Venkateshwara University, Tirupati, examines in **Women's Status in**

Buddhism how Buddhism liberated women from many social fetters.

The Mahabharata is the longest epic poem in the world and discusses every conceivable subject.



Dr Narendra Kohli, the famous author of the Hindi novel on Swami Vivekananda *Todo Kara Todo*, writes on the **Relevance of the Mahabharata**.

The greatest religious gathering occurs every twelve years in India at the Kumbha Mela. Its history is briefly described by Swami Nirgunananda, a senior monk staying at Belur Math, in **Kumbha Mela: Drawing Devout Millions**.



In the second part of **Sri Ramakrishna: The 'New Man' of the Age – IV** Swami Bhajanananda, Assistant Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, throws a clear light on how Sri Ramakrishna has set in motion a new and powerful spiritual movement through a monastic order.

Worship of the Age

A GLANCE AT THE HISTORY of human-kind reveals the repeated rise and fall of many civilizations. In the midst of this scene one can see only a few of them still standing even after much tribulation. During the decay and fall of any society people disperse and become like seeds, combining with others, to grow and form other societies.

Through their languages, social and natural laws, and ways of life, civilizations have a particular perception of themselves as related to the visible world as well as to the ethereal realms. The higher this perception, the better a civilization is equipped to stand against inevitable negative forces. Cities can be destroyed, but not citizens' ideas of their God and the world. From this relationship, blended with higher human needs and surroundings, have flourished religion, philosophy, ethics, arts, culture, education, sciences, law systems, and so forth.

In almost all civilizations people looked at the world outside, wondered, pondered, and produced their conception of God and gods and goddesses. This approach gave them beautiful ideas of religion with an accompanying mythology and rituals. But the conception of soul was woefully absent, or if present, it was very crude. The mysterious mind was invariably taken as spirit or soul. In India, from the earliest times, the social structure and Vedic way of life, with its culture, language, and so on, was conceived as a reflection of Virat, the Cosmic Person. The uniqueness of this civilization was the approach it took to discover this truth: it commenced the search for Reality

from within. Thus, the most sublime and infinite ideas of the Atman were developed, which resulted in superb infinite conceptions of Brahman. Offshoots of the Vedic religion, like Buddhism and Jainism, also followed the tradition of looking within. This particular feature was rarely understood, and even now the Upanishadic declaration '*sarvam hy-etat brahma, ayam-atma brahma*'; all this is surely Brahman, this Atman is Brahman' is considered blasphemy by some. But for many, to see and live this view involves a whole paradigm shift, a new way of thinking.

This new way of thinking, which was almost impossible in the past and resulted in unnecessary pugnacity, is made possible in modern times thanks to the sciences attempting to understand the world and the cosmos from the inside. The laws governing the world are now being applied to understand the cosmos, and this method has proved to be extremely refined. The same is true with psychology and other branches of knowledge. Where some religious systems have felt threatened by new discoveries, Vedanta has embraced them seriously. The recent foray of science into the field of consciousness has been welcomed by Vedanta, as this is the bedrock of Indian civilization, which through these discoveries has been vindicated to the world and will now become stronger. Science may destroy erroneous conceptions of the world, heavens, and God, but it cannot destroy consciousness—rather, it helps unravel its dimensions. Vedanta and science have taken a similar path; one earlier and the other later, only their terminology differs.

Ordinary persons want answers from the outside and are pleased by a comfortable religion. Inner forms of religion are difficult and need much discipline. The same is true with rigorous scientific disciplines. Nowadays many discerning minds are opening to this inner path, which is attested by the growing popularity of eastern religions and philosophies.

Ethics, human rights, and human dignity are common to all because they are universal principles based on human beings' nature, not because some religion or charter has declared them to be so. These universal principles can become comprehensive and firmly rooted when they are seen not merely as civilizational progress, but as road maps for a powerful evolution of the human consciousness into a divine consciousness. This process makes us enter into the sacred space within where the Atman dwells. With the concept of the Atman ethics becomes dynamic spirituality beyond mere doing good, or pleasing one's God, or escaping eternal punishment; it becomes the factor that interconnects all beings bringing real peace to oneself and others.

The world is getting better because humanity is increasingly taking the refined view of things that starts from within. This has unbelievably cleared the path to create a global civilization, which was also an ancient Vedic idea: '*yatra vishvam bhavati-eka nidam*; the whole world becomes one place of rest.' This type of universal society does not spend time and money in building places of worship or in worshipping in old ones, because all worship is performed within each and every person. All forms of work, speech, and thought can be transformed into modes of worship.

There was a time when people believed that the earth was the centre of the universe. It needed a massive paradigm shift to understand that earth was a tiny planet in an insignificant solar system with the sun at its centre. Nothing

changed in the universe, but there was a quantum leap in our perception and knowledge in comprehending the universe of mind-boggling dimensions, with billions of stars in each galaxy, and galaxies also numbering in billions. All this was possible through the human mind. The continuing scientific study of the cosmos is, as it were, enlivening the cosmos through human consciousness, and the vast universe is becoming self-aware; apart from changing history and making humans feel more and more as members of one civilization. This leap in our perception and knowledge has released human potential and raised humanity to a higher level. This is the new religion of the age, or to put it correctly, the new religious form of the ancient doctrines of Vedanta that were tirelessly preached by Swami Vivekananda while he travelled around the world. Swamiji says: 'What vain gods shall we go after and yet cannot worship the god that we see all round us, the Virat?'

Sri Ramakrishna describes two of his mystical experiences: 'One day, while worshipping Shiva, I was about to offer a bel-leaf on the head of the image, when it was revealed to me that this Virat, this Universe, itself is Shiva. After that my worship through the image came to an end. Another day I had been plucking flowers, when it was revealed to me that the flowering plants were so many bouquets ... adorning the Universal Form of God. That was the end of my plucking flowers.' Vivekananda's voice is the voice of Sri Ramakrishna, which is the voice of ancient India and Vedanta inviting humanity to discover the infinite Reality, within as the Atman and without as Virat, the palpable form of Brahman. The first glance revealed the monumental debris of world history. An enlightened second glance will reveal a truly unified world order based on the inner divinity, with Virat as the object of worship.



Vivekananda and His Seafaring Vessels

Somenath Mukherjee

WHEN SWAMI VIVEKANANDA left Bombay for his first West-bound voyage on 31 May 1893, Indian history was utterly unaware that this incident would open its vistas to unprecedented episodes. He was waved off by two people: Munshi Jagmohanlal, the private secretary of an Indian raja, and Alasinga Perumal, a South Indian school teacher. The latter, one of his earliest ardent disciples, was instrumental in materializing the voyage. Both the men accompanied the swami up the gangway and remained on board till the hour came, when they prostrated themselves at the feet of their beloved swami in final salutation and disembarked with moist eyes. The ship chugged out of the port with a monk who, barring those sporadically in contact with him around the country, was almost unknown in the subcontinent he always referred to as 'my India'. Around twenty years from that date his biography includes the following lines:

The Swami stood on deck and gazed towards land until it faded from sight, sending his blessings to those who loved him and those whom he loved. His eyes were filled with tears, his heart overwhelmed with emotion. He thought of the Master, of the Holy Mother, of his brother-disciples. He thought of India and her culture, of her greatness and her suffering, of the Rishis and of the Sanatana Dharma. His heart was bursting with love for his native land. ... The ship moved on its way southward to Ceylon, while the Swami remained alone with his thoughts and the vastness of the sea.¹

The following nine gruelling years had tested every ounce of his physical and mental stamina. But he kept the prophecy he made a few years earlier while leaving Banaras: '[I] shall not return until I have burst on society like a bomb-shell' (1.2.48). Posterity raised him to immortality for his spiritual abundance and, more so, for what he gave to humankind during those nine exhausting years. But before leaving the earth he knew that what he gave would never wane.

We will, instead of dwelling upon the trials and triumphs of those demanding phases in the swami's life, pick out an interesting aspect from it to enlarge his already fascinating history: we will direct our efforts to the story of the steamships that took him around the seven seas of the world. But before starting we must justify what such facts have to do with Vivekananda's history.

Firstly, it has in its background the inspiring words of Marie Louise Burke, the leading Vivekananda researcher, who wrote:

Even a small scrap of paper or a shred of cloth that he left behind becomes an object to enshrine and worship. Whatever he touched became charged with his own vibrant holiness and can impart to us some aura of himself. There is no detail of his action too small to record, no whiff of his thought too inconsequential to ponder over, perhaps to write tomes about it. If he spoke to some fortunate man or woman for five minutes, we want to know the biography of that person; if he entered a building, we want to know its architecture and its history.²

Secondly, so captivating is the account of



The SS Britannic

those early steamships that it deserves a link with the Vivekananda history. To prove our point and to add a relevant backdrop to what we are going to narrate, we prefer to quote how passenger shipping began to flourish:

On July 4, 1840, Britannia, the first ship under the Cunard name [Cunard Line], left Liverpool with a cow on board to supply fresh milk to the passengers on the 14-day transatlantic crossing. The advent of pleasure cruises is linked to the year 1844, and a new industry began.

During the 1850s and 1860s there was a dramatic improvement in the quality of the voyage for passengers. Ships began to cater solely to passengers, rather than to cargo or mail contracts, and added luxuries like electric lights, more deck space, and entertainment. ... The endorsement by the British Medical Journal of sea voyages for curative purposes in the 1880s further encouraged the public to take leisurely pleasure cruises as well as transatlantic travel.³

Besides,

The steamship, by virtue of its regularity even more than speed, revolutionised world-wide mail communications and there was no prouder vessel than [the one] bearing the imposing prefix 'R.M.S.', Royal Mail Steamship, 'conveying

the Mails and Dispatches, under contract with Her Majesty's Government.' ... For the traveller, taking passage in an R.M.S. meant safety and speed, and promised the Victorian virtues of seasoned British officers, stout seamen, whether from Bristol or Bengal, a plentiful bill of fare and an irreproachable dignity derived from sailing with the English Mails.⁴

Now let us begin our narrative with the vessel that took Vivekananda on his maiden voyage to the West and, thereby, unfurled the saga of an unbelievable magnitude.

The Peninsular⁵

About the swami's first sea voyage we have the following record: 'A first-class ticket had been bought for him on the Japan-bound P. and O. steamer *Peninsular*, Jagmohan maintaining that the guru of a Raja should travel like a Raja.'⁶ This 'P and O' stood for the initial two letters of the Peninsular and Orient Steam Navigation Company, which owned the steamer. The company's history goes back to 1835 when one young man, Brodie McGhie Willcox, with little influence and limited pecuniary means, decided to commence a business and, surprisingly, opened his office in London's Lime Street. He wanted to be a shipbroker and agent and took Arthur Anderson as a clerk in his venture. Soon they became partners and managed to have the financial patronage of Captain Richard Bourne, a Dublin shipowner, and, finally, the Peninsular Steam Navigation Company, having had its first Prospectus issued in 1835, became a reality. The first steamer of the company sailed by 1842 and by around 1844 it took up regular mail service from

England to Alexandria and from Suez to Ceylon, Madras, and Calcutta—by 1845 it was extended to Penang, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. Steam service to Australia was established by 1852, and the company managed to take over the Bombay mail service from the East India Company. When the Suez Canal opened in 1869 the company had to withstand the huge loss of their earlier investment in providing the overland route between Alexandria and Suez before the Canal became functional. However, with plans and prudence such adversity was reversed, and, eventually, the company acquired eleven shipping companies worldwide.

The *Peninsular*, a passenger liner, was a distinguished vessel of the P & O and, grouped with her sister ship the *Oriental*, was known as one of the 'Pretty Sisters'—though, in relevant parameters, the former was considered to be a better vessel. The *Peninsular* was in service from 1888 to 1909 and was built by the Caird & Co., Yard Greenock Country, UK. Her post registration official number and signal letters became 93208 and KWCN respectively. She had a gross tonnage of 5,294, a net registered tonnage of 3,048, and deadweight of 3,900 tons. The length of 410.5 feet was matched by her breadth, depth, and draught of 48 feet, 34.3 feet, and 25 feet respectively. The *Peninsular* was equipped with a triple expansion steam engine with 6,000 i.h.p. and single screw propulsion, which allowed her speed of 15 knots. The ship had a cargo capacity of 155,437 cubic feet and was able to accommodate 170 passengers in first class and 96 in second class.

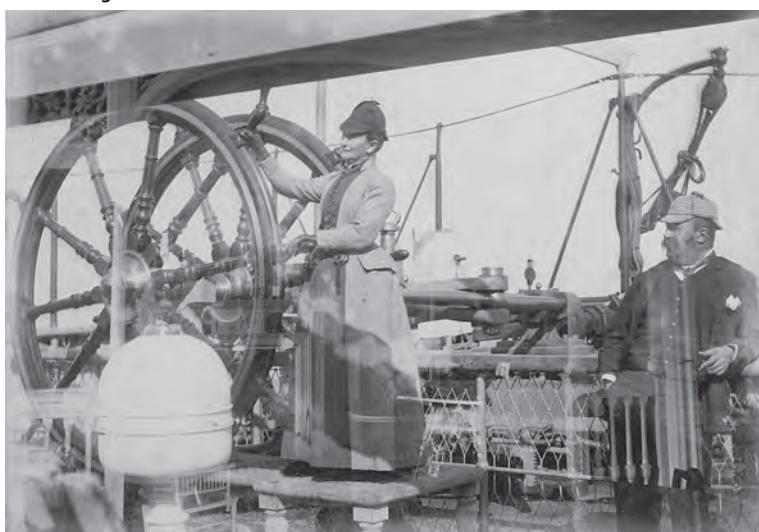
On 6 October 1888 the *Peninsular* was launched by Miss Taylor, daughter of Mr H O Taylor,

P & O superintendent at Greenock. On 17 November 1888 she was registered as *Peninsular* for the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company and ran on trial on 21 November 1888. Finally, on 7 December 1888 she left London on her maiden voyage to Bombay and Shanghai.

In 1898, when sailing between Colombo and Australia, the ship had sustained hurricane damage. In the following year a case of plague was detected on board. But her biggest misfortune came on 27 March 1902 when 'off Beckton Gas-works outward bound from the Royal Albert Dock, London, she manoeuvred to go astern of the sailing barge *Onward* which was crossing on the port tack. The barge unexpectedly came up into the wind and *Peninsular*'s port anchor caught and carried away *Onward*'s sails without touching the barge herself.'

For around three years the ship had to remain in dock, undergoing refitting and modernization, and in 1905 was put on shuttle between Aden and Bombay, together with her sister ship the *Oriental*. In 1906 the *Peninsular* had smashed her propeller and, hence, was diverted to the service between Brindisi in Italy and Port Said. This, however, was the beginning of her end. On 11 August 1909 the vessel was sold to

The steering wheel of the SS Peninsular



Fratelli Bruzzo of Italy for 9,312 pounds sterling, and merely within a fortnight, on 26 August 1909, the once admired *Peninsular* was taken to Genoa for scrapping.

The Journey

In his letter of 10 July 1893 from Yokohama, Japan, to his Madras disciples, Vivekananda narrated his journey aboard the *Peninsular*: 'From Bombay we reached Colombo. Our steamer remained in port for nearly the whole day, and we took the opportunity of getting off to have a look at the town.' Adding a few more facts of his moving around the town, he continued: 'The next station was Penang, which is only a strip of land along the sea in the body of the Malaya Peninsula. ... On our way from Penang to Singapore, we had glimpses of Sumatra with its high mountains, and the Captain pointed out to me several places as the favourite haunts of pirates in days gone by. Singapore is the capital of the Straits Settlements.' The next stop was at Hong Kong, wherein the Swami wrote: 'You feel that you have reached China, the Chinese element predominates so much. All labour, all trade seems to be in their hands. And Hong

Kong is real China.' For three days Swamiji stayed in Hong Kong and visited Canton before sailing to Japan. Nagasaki happened to be the first port in Japan where he disembarked and drove around the town for a few hours. Next was Kobe where, as he writes, 'I gave up the steamer and took the land-route to Yokohama, with a view to seeing the interior of Japan.' The Swami, incidentally, had 'seen three big cities in the interior—Osaka, a great manufacturing town, Kyoto, the former capital, and Tokyo, the present capital.' And his opinion was that, 'the Japanese seem now to have fully awakened themselves to the necessity of the present times.'⁸

But whatever little we can know from the above letter, it nowhere has any description of the ship or Swamiji's impression of her ambience. This was not unexpected as he had his priorities elsewhere. But we happened to find a book in which we found the following: 'The classic travelogue of one of America's most famous authors, Mark Twain, *Following the Equator* was written when having fallen upon hard times financially, Twain found himself compelled to take a tour of the British Empire in 1895 and

write about it.'⁹ It helps us that Mark Twain, almost at a time identical to the swami's maiden voyage to the West, took a reverse journey that finally brought him to India in the P & O steamer *Oceana*. Therefore, selective extracts from Twain's writing would more or less give us an idea of the *Peninsular* as well. Twain writes:

MONDAY—DECEMBER 23, 1895. Sailed from Sydney for Ceylon in the P. & O. steamer 'Oceana' ...



A group of people on board the SS Peninsular

This 'Oceana' is a stately big ship, luxuriously appointed. She has spacious promenade decks. Large rooms; a surprisingly comfortable ship. The officer's library is well selected; a ship's library is not usually that ... For meals, the bugle call, man-of-war fashion; a pleasant change from the terrible gong (152).

In this palatial ship the passengers dress for dinner. The ladies' toilettes make a fine display of color, and this is in keeping with the elegance of the vessel's furnishings and the flooding brilliance of the electric light. ... There has been a deal of cricket-playing on board; it seems a queer game for a ship, but they enclose the promenade deck with nettings and keep the ball from flying overboard, and the sport goes very well (154).

For further news of the swami's onward voyage we had to wait for his letter to Alasinga Perumal on 20 August 1893: 'From Japan I reached Vancouver. The way was by the Northern Pacific. It was very cold and I suffered much for want of warm clothing. However, I reached Vancouver anyhow, and thence went through Canada to Chicago.'¹⁰ This takes us to the *Empress of India*, which took the swami from Yokohama to Vancouver: 'Having disembarked from the *Peninsular* at Kobe, the Swami now boarded the new 6,000-ton *Empress of India*, which left Yokohama on July 14 and sailed for Vancouver.'¹¹ This time Vivekananda had left almost no narrative of his voyage and, therefore, we have to depend on what is available in his classic biography: 'From Vancouver, in British Columbia, where the ship landed on the evening of July 25 [1893], he travelled to Chicago. His train passed through the scenic Canadian Rockies to Winnipeg and thence down into the rolling lake country of Minnesota and Wisconsin' (*ibid.*). And a few lines later it is hinted that: 'The Long trip continued until the evening of the fifth day, probably July 30, when did the Swami reach his

destination' (400). While doing research on this particular phase of the swami's journey I recently discovered more dependable evidence that almost confirms 30 July as the acceptable date of his reaching Chicago by railroad from Winnipeg, Canada.¹² But since this has no direct relation to our present topic, we will look into the history of the ship that, for the first time, took the swami from the Eastern shores to those of the West.

(*To be continued*)

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Puranas: Spirituality for the Masses

Swami Samarpanananda

IN HIS LECTURE 'BHAKTI', delivered in Lahore, Swami Vivekananda offers an interesting opinion about the Puranas:

Whether you believe in the scientific accuracy of the Puranas or not, there is not one among you whose life has not been influenced by the story of Prahlada, or that of Dhruva, or of any one of these great Pauranika saints. We have not only to acknowledge the power of the Puranas in our own day, but we ought to be grateful to them as they gave us in the past a more comprehensive and a better popular religion than what the degraded later-day Buddhism was leading us to.¹

He further said in his lecture in Calcutta: 'Very little of our life today is bound and regulated by the orders of the Karma Kanda of the Vedas. In our ordinary lives we are mostly Pauranikas or Tantrikas, and, even where some Vedic texts are used by the Brahmins of India, the adjustment of the texts is mostly not according to the Vedas, but according to the Tantras or the Puranas' (3.324).

Relevant Literature

The Puranas, of ancient times, are a class of sacred works that today form the basis of Hinduism. They are eighteen in number and are very popular among all classes of peoples. Whenever a Hindu speaks of religion and God, she or he is quoting the Puranas. This literature has been a source of great inspiration for centuries. Most of these Puranas are in the form of discourse by a sage or a dialogue between sages, and in some cases it is God or a god who teaches. They narrate in human terms the divinity and the doings

of gods, sages, and heroes. Of course, most of the descriptions of events are grossly exaggerated, but with the element of divinity or yogic power such stories do not sound incongruous, they rather appeal to the listener or reader. In addition the Puranas also discuss legends, traditions, philosophy, religious and social issues, different duties of people, customs and food, ceremonies and purificatory rites, sins and penances, pilgrimage, descriptions of heavens and hells, karma and rebirth, images and idols, and worship. Each Purana is complete in itself, and a person following any one of them would have all his or her religious and spiritual needs fulfilled. The stories of Sri Krishna in the *Bhagavata*, of Vishnu in the *Vishnu Purana*, and of Shiva in the *Shiva Purana* have influenced people for thousands of years.

Before they were standardized, the Puranas had a long oral tradition. They now contain more than five lakh—half a million—verses! The chief objective of this literature was to educate people about the greatness of religion and the pitfalls of worldly life as well as to teach sublime spiritual truths in simple form. That is why they exert a great authority in what they teach. The sages who first wrote them found suitable historical or semi-historical persons and superimposed upon them all the best, or worst, qualities, laying down rules of dharma for everyone. Though the Puranas have history at their core, they are not meant to be historical or geographical literature. None of the sages saw the Puranas as inferior, and Shukadeva, one of the greatest sages, was not only a knower of Pauranic lore but also played an important role in teaching the *Bhagavata*.

Characteristics

The tendency to create, understand, and live by mythology is prevalent all over the world, for it is part of the human mind. If we do not create a spiritual mythology, we create cartoons, movies, fiction, and other fantasy stories. At the dawn of civilization, before the system of writing and recording was developed, humans who watched the world with curiosity and tried to understand it recorded what they saw and thought in an oral tradition. Added to this were the narratives of divine beings and heroes, traditions, and customs arranged in wonderful stories. As these stories grew, there arose a class of people whose duty was to memorize and relate them to the community. All these stories were linked to the spiritual or religious life of the community and were endorsed either by rulers or by priests. Once this link to the spiritual or religious aspect of society is broken, these narratives lose their qualities and become mere folk or fairy tales.

In Hinduism the principles and philosophy of religion were zealously preserved in the Vedas, which were the highest class of sacred literature. They could not be distorted with mythology, though they were the source of most mythological stories. The principles and the philosophy of many other religions are so interwoven with mythology that it is hard to distinguish them. In many cases mythology stood supreme and swallowed the philosophy. With the passage of time people forgot the spiritual principles and fight over the mythological descriptions; this process makes these religions simply Puranic.

The Puranas are distinct from the *Itihasa*, history—like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*—through two chief characteristics: first, the Puranas focus on the mythological aspect, whereas the *Itihasa* focuses on the historical aspect; secondly, the Puranas describe the *pancha lakshana*, five features: *sarga*, creation

of the universe by God; *pratisarga*, destruction and re-creation; *vamsa*, genealogy of gods, sages, and dynasties; *manvantara*, the reigns of the fourteen Manus; and *vamsanuchartam*, history of the solar and lunar dynasties. However, most of these Puranas either omit some of these topics or deal with them superficially and instead incorporate extensive glorification of various deities. According to some ancient scholars, these *lakshanas* are for the Upapuranas, secondary Puranas. The *Bhagavata* gives ten conditions for a work to be Purana, in which geography and genealogy have not been mentioned as essential conditions.² Although the Puranas are ranked below the Vedas, they do command respect, for it is said in the *Mahabharata*'s 'Adi Parva': 'By the aid of history [*Itihasa*] and the Puranas, the Vedas may be expounded; but the Veda is afraid of one of little information lest he should hurt it.'³

The Puranas are said to belong to the class of literature that are called *Suhrit-samhitas*, friendly treatises, as compared to the Vedas, which are *Prabhu-samhitas*, commanding treatises with supreme authority. Many Hindus, however, firmly believe that a recital of the Puranas is the easiest way to attain peace, perfection, devotion, and liberation. The Puranas were mostly narrated by *sutas*, who were children of mixed marriages between brahmanas and kshatriyas.

Origin

According to tradition, Veda Vyasa is accepted as the compiler of all the eighteen Puranas. It is believed that this great sage was so upset after the war recorded in the *Mahabharata* that he focused all his creative energies in compiling these devotional works for the common masses. Modern scholars, however, believe that the bulk of the eighteen Puranas was more or less established during the reign of the Guptas (320–550 CE),



Vishnu revealing his divinity to Vasudeva and Devaki (Bhagavata Purana), c.1725

with minor additions to the texts continuing up to later medieval times. Except the *Bhavishya Purana*, which continued to grow in size—it even speaks of British rule in India—most of the Puranas are believed to have been given a final form around 1000 CE. Acharya Shankara treats the Puranas as spiritually authentic and at times quotes their verses in his commentaries.

Many scholars believe that Veda Vyasa had originally composed only one Purana, which he imparted to his disciple Suta Lomaharshana. Later this work got divided and subdivided into eighteen. This also agrees with the fact that originally there was only one Veda that later was divided into four by Veda Vyasa. What Veda Vyasa did with the Vedas, his disciples might have also done with the Puranas.

The anecdote portion of the Vedas, known as *narasamsi*, contains stories. These stories were later taken up by various sages and developed into Puranas. Besides this, some Puranic stories were also current even during the later Vedic period, as is evinced by its mention in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* of the Yajur Veda and also in the Atharva Veda. Both these works proclaim the sacred origin of the Purana and give it a status almost equal to the Vedas. This

made the Puranas popular as the fifth Veda.

The texts and the form of the Puranas were not fixed as in the Shrutis, Vedas. Being a Smriti class of literature, the sage-poets could modify them. Society was not immune from internal disturbances or external attacks and in order to counter such challenges rites, customs, and beliefs had to be modified constantly. This resulted in the fluid nature of this literature, although the additions and modifications were not always new, for quite often verses and even chapters were incorporated from other Puranas, Smritis, or other similar works.

In the same manner people of different sects took liberty in emphasizing their respective gods in the Puranas. The contradictions that came up due to this fluidity naturally made them less authentic, but as far as the essence is concerned, all Puranas contain the same truths expressed in the Vedas. That is why Acharya Shankara felt no hesitation to begin his wonderful commentary on the Bhagavadgita with a verse from the Puranas.

Growth and Popularity

The Sanskrit of the Vedas is archaic and difficult to master; the subtle metaphysics of the Upanishads is difficult for a common person to understand; the Puranas, hence, are of special value as they present Vedic truths in a simple manner. This literature gives a person easy access to the mysteries of life and the way to bliss, which otherwise would remain elusive. Moreover, the Vedas belonged exclusively to the brahmanas because of the discipline involved, while the Puranas, available to all, were far more interesting and had a dynamic nature. The aim of this literature is

to impress on the minds of the masses the teachings of the Vedas as well as to generate in them an undying devotion for God through concrete examples, stories and legends, lives of great sages, allegories, and chronicles of great events. In the Puranas emphasis is laid on the concrete aspects of religious and social life. This is how these books made religion possible for all.

In the history of world religions every religion faces conflicts between its prophets, priests, and people. Prophets show the path to freedom, whereas priests are the keepers of the traditions that the prophets had created; and people are able to follow the prophets through the rules laid down by the priests. The Upani-shadic period is marked by the rise in supremacy of the kshatriyas, warriors, over the brahmanas, priests, whereas the popularity of the Puranas is due to the rise of the masses against the brahmanas and the kshatriyas. Also, whenever a saint arose from the masses, people got the strength to throw away the religious yoke imposed by the priests. A saint invariably owed allegiance to some Purana; in consequence, a particular Purana became popular among the saint's followers, and with time many Puranas had a large following. That is how the Puranas become the connecting element of society.

The Puranas are easy to be read aloud, sung, and enacted in dramas during festivals. All these resulted in their overwhelming popularity. Today even an illiterate Hindu or Hindus living abroad are not ignorant of the principles and philosophy of Hinduism because of the Puranic stories that they had heard at some point in their lives. The Puranas not only educated the masses and infused them with noble ideals, they also tactfully solved social and economic problems that arose due to social upheavals and foreign invasions. Similarly, a look at the *vratas*, observance of vows and penances, shows the insight of the sages

concerning human nature, particularly those of women, who are the true keepers of religion.

Puranas and Upapuranas

According to the *Matsya Purana*, the entire body of the Puranas belong to three categories: sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic. They are also classified as belonging to Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva.

The Brahma Puranas are: (i) The *Bhavishya Purana*: It has 14,000 verses in the form of the sun god teaching Manu, the first born. It mostly contains statements about future events and persons and also describes holy places and the rights of pilgrims. (ii) The *Brahma Purana*: In 25,000 verses Brahma teaches Daksha Prajapati about the beginning of the universe. It is called the *adi*, first, Purana. (iii) The *Brahmanda Purana*: It has 12,000 verses and deals with the Cosmic Egg from which arose creation. It has the famous *Lalita Sahasranama* and the *Adhyatma Ramayana* and is considered to be the last of the Puranas. Its contents are similar to those of the *Vayu Purana*. (iv) The *Brahmavaivarta Purana*: Having 18,000 verses it describes creation, the purpose of life, and the deeds of gods like Ganesha, Krishna, and so on. It also describes the universe as *vivarta*, not an actual transformation but an appearance, of Brahman. It is one of the latest works and is in the form of Narada teaching Savarnika. (v) The *Markandeya Purana*: This early work has 9,000 verses and contains the dialogue between sages Jaimini and Markandeya. It is also famous for containing the *Chandi*. (vi) The *Vamana Purana*: Its 10,000 verses speak of the *vamana*, dwarf, avatara of Vishnu. This work originally belonged to the ancient school of philosophy called Pancharatra and is similar to the *Varaha Purana*. The episode of Shiva's marriage with Parvati is also described in it.

The Vishnu Puranas are: (i) The *Bhagavata Purana*: It is a superb literary creation with

excellent language, style, and metre in 18,000 verses that contain the records of Vishnu's devotees. In the tenth section appears the story of Krishna. In its original form the work must have been pre-Buddhistic. (ii) The *Garuda Purana*: In it Vishnu instructs Garuda, his devotee and vehicle, in 19,000 verses—though there is a smaller version of 8,000 verses. This work describes what happens after a person dies and various kinds of punishments. It is encyclopaedic and discusses astronomy, medicine, grammar, and many other things. (iii) The *Naradiya Purana*: It contains 25,000 verses and has a description on dharma and major pilgrimages. This is also a typical Vaishnava work and is a discourse by Narada to Sanatkumara. (iv) The *Padma Purana*: It contains 55,000 verses and deals with the essence of religion and the cosmos. It comes in two recensions: North and South. A careful examination shows that it has borrowed extensively from the *Matsya Purana* and the *Vishnu Purana*. (v) The *Vishnu Purana*: It is considered the oldest work and a *puranaratna*, the gem among the Puranas. Having a unified structure of 23,000 verses it was narrated by sage Parashara to Maitreya and is dedicated to Vishnu. (vi) The *Varaha Purana*: With 14,000 verses it is in the form of narration by the *varaha*, boar, avatara. It discusses holy places and different mantras.

The Shiva Puranas are: (i) The *Kurma Purana*: It contains 8,000 verses and has information on the *kurma*, tortoise, avatara of Vishnu. Some scholars believe that this book originally belonged to the Pancharatra school but was appropriated by the Pashupatas, Shiva's devotees. It is in the form of discourse by Kurma to Indradyumna in Patala. (ii) The *Linga Purana*: In 12,000 verses it describes the importance of the holy symbol of Shiva and also the origin of the universe. In it Shiva teaches about his twenty-eight different forms. (iii) The *Agni Purana*:

Here the fire god teaches Vashishtha in 12,000 verses about the various incarnations of Vishnu as well as the Shiva-linga, Durga, art, science, astronomy, and so on. It has taken its material from a large number of books including the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Yajnavalkya Smriti*, and the *Harivamsha Purana*. (iv) The *Matsya Purana*: It contains 13,000 verses describing the first avatara of Vishnu, who taught Manu. It deals with pilgrimages, penances, gifts, politics, omens, portents, images, and so on. Some of its verses are taken straight from the *Vayu Purana*. (v) The *Skanda Purana*: It is the largest Purana, containing 84,000 verses, and is dedicated to Skanda or Kartikeya, offspring of Shiva and Parvati. It is a relatively late work and is narrated by Taraka-sura to Skanda. (vi) The *Vayu Purana*: It contains 14,000 verses dedicated to the wind god. An ancient work that went through a lot of modifications and deals with the creation and re-creation of the universe, the measurement of time, the origin of gods, sages, demons, and apsaras. It also describes the divisions of earth, heaven, and hell.

In addition we have the *Shiva Mahapurana*, with 24,000 verses, and the *Harivamsha Purana*, with 14,000 verses, dedicated to Shiva and Krishna respectively. The *Bhagavata Purana* accepts the *Shiva Mahapurana* in the original list, but more ancient traditions do not accept them as correct.

There are an equal number of Upapuranas, and the *Matsya Purana* describes them as subdivisions of the original Puranas. Some of these works can be as old as the principal ones. The list of them varies widely, though the essential are: *Sanatkumara*, *Narasimha*, *Brihannaradiya*, *Shivarahasya*, *Durvasa*, *Kapila*, *Vamana*, *Bhargava*, *Varuna*, *Kalika*, *Samba*, *Nandi*, *Surya*, *Parashara*, *Vashishtha*, *Devi Bhagavata*, *Ganesha*, and *Hamsa*. There are also other religious books recently discovered that claim to be Puranic

literature, the latest being the *Svayambhu Purana*.

Rise of a New Religion

The important contribution of the Puranas is the introduction of the concept of *avatara*. The Vedas preach both an impersonal and a personal God, but the Puranas put forward a new ideal: God coming down. God incarnates again and again in one form or the other for the protection of religion and devotees. The concepts of *Ishvara* and *prakriti-laya* Purushas—perfected souls merged in nature to come out in a new cycle of creation as lords of that cycle—were reconciled in the Puranas.

The principal gods of the Vedic pantheon, like Indra and Varuna, were slowly superseded by new popular gods. It was during this time that there was a great assimilation of peoples into the main body of Aryan society, and what better way to assimilate them than by accepting their gods. In the early Vedic period Vishnu was one of the twelve Adityas, but in the later Vedic period he was of secondary importance. With the rise of the Puranic period Vishnu became much stronger and popular than he was originally. Later on Rama and Krishna were also portrayed as his incarnations. Similarly, Rudra was a Vedic god and in this period he was given the personality that combined the Pashupati of the Indus valley civilization and the Shiva of South India. The stories that we usually hear about Shiva are a mixture of all these personalities. The rise of the *trimurti*, trinity, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva was an important development of

this phase. The concept of *trimurti* as Agni, Vayu, and Surya was present in Vedic times as well, but the new trinity replaced the older one. It resulted in the emergence of the powerful movements of Vaishnavism and Shaivism. Synthesis rather than dogmatism was the watchword of the Puranas. By accepting Vishnu as a presiding deity the pastoral and agricultural people were brought to the mainstream; the same occurred with the tribes living in the forests and hills, which considered Shiva as their presiding deity.

The Puranic period is especially famous for the worship of Shakti. Each god had his female counterpart. Female divinities like Shri, Sarasvati, Lakshmi, Durga, Parvati were Vedic goddesses, but they rose to prominence and glory in this period. This male-female conception of the chief divinities was also in reply to the popular Sankhya philosophical principles of Purusha and Prakriti, along with the rise of women's prominent role. In the Puranas the gods and goddesses responded to their devotees, were comforting, compassionate, and solicitous, which made people easily relate to them.

Durga slaying the demon Raktabija and Kali lapping up the demon's blood (Markandeya Purana), c.1800-25



The doctrine of bhakti, which had its origins in the Vedas, now became fully developed and powerful. Devotion to any of the popular gods replaced the complicated and complex Vedic rituals. Bhakti has been discussed in all its richness in the Puranas. The lives of sages and saints were illustrated with devotion to God and this acted as a great impeller for the masses. Hence, the study of the Puranas and listening to its sacred recitals that narrated God's different lilas became an important part of sadhana for devotees.

In the *Shiva Mahapurana* Shiva is highly praised, while an inferior position is given to other gods. On the other hand, in the *Vishnu Purana* Vishnu is highly praised, while an inferior position is given to other gods. However, this was only meant to increase the faith of the devotees in their particular Ishta Devata, Chosen Deity. But the principle that these gods are in essence one and the same keeps running through the literature.

The rise of bhakti also brought out the popularity of image worship. Slowly the Vedic sacrificial altars were replaced by images. This was also the time when Buddhism, along with their places and modes of worship, was assimilated into the Hindu fold. Temples and gorgeous rituals arose, but now with Vedic mantras and traditions. The construction of images and temples and the connected rituals were discussed elaborately in some of the Puranas.

In this period a greater emphasis was laid on ethical teachings rather than metaphysical speculations. The concepts of *ritam*, divine law, karma, rebirth, heaven, and hell became crystallized. The Puranas describe many heavens and hells, where persons either enjoyed or suffered according to their karma—once their karma is exhausted, they are reborn. Therefore, the Puranas state that these heavens and hells are not permanent and that this world is the place for

karma. During the Puranic period a life of activity was specifically recommended as against useless renunciation; this gave a great impetus to the concept of karma yoga. *Loka samgraha*, doing good to the world, was also emphasized as a spiritual discipline.

The Puranas made a successful attempt at reconciling virtues and actions that were practised by brahmanas, kshatriyas, vaishyas, and shudras. By bringing them together and by giving them a universal status through the concept of *svadharma*, one's own dharma, the Puranas created a powerful and silent social revolution that made society cohesive and progressive.

Conclusion

Everything that is conducive to the attainment of spirituality in the world must be brought to the aid of humanity, and the Puranas fulfil this condition. Swami Vivekananda says:

So long as there shall be such a thing as personal and material love, one cannot go behind the teachings of the Puranas. So long as there shall be the human weakness of leaning upon somebody for support, these Puranas, in some form or other, must always exist. ... This is a necessity of the nature of man; for them only are there no Puranas who have gone beyond all human weakness and have become what is really wanted of a Paramahansa, brave and bold souls, who have gone beyond the bondages of Maya.⁴



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Kodungalloor Bhagavati Kali Temple

Santi Prasad Ghosal



SWAMI VIVEKANANDA, as an unknown wandering monk, was not allowed to enter the Bhagavati Kali temple in Kodungalloor, Kerala. The temple is about two thousand years old and the presiding deity is known by different names as Kali, Bhadrakali, Durga, and Bhagavati. Kodungalloor, anglicized as Cranganore, is a town in Thrissur district and was the erstwhile princely state of Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar. It is located about thirty-eight kilometres south of Thrissur town.

Ancient and Medieval History

Muchiri, or Muzaris, in the first century CE was India's first truly international town and was famed for its cosmopolitan culture. Being a major trading centre between the Chera kingdom and the Roman Empire it was considered a gateway to India. This was due to the lucrative spice and textile trade as well as the ambience of freedom it offered to everyone. This remarkable city welcomed the Greeks, West Asians, Chinese, Arabs, and much later the Portuguese, Dutch, and English. The bustling port was destroyed

by a massive flooding of the river Periyar in 1341 CE, which helped open a new port in Kochi. Muchiri was also known as Mahodayapuram and Muyirikkodu; to the locals it was Vanchi. Merchants from a number of countries are also believed to have traded and settled here—even today one discovers many ancient artifacts. The correct location of Muchiri was disputed for long, but now there is general consensus that it is the present Kodungalloor. The discovery in 1983 of a hoard of coins minted in Rome around six miles from present Kodungalloor, in a place called Pattanam, clinched the ancient city's exact location. Apart from the coins, fragments of pottery from Rome and West Asia also solidified the claims. The famous St Thomas, Christ's disciple, landed here in 52 CE to spread Christianity and built the first church at Palayur some distance away from Kodungalloor. The first mosque of India was built here in 629 CE by the king Chera-man Perumal after he converted to Islam.

A Shiva temple and one dedicated to the goddess Kali existed in the present location from ancient times. The Chera king Cheran Senguttuvan

had installed in it the image of Kannaki, or Kannagi, a pious lady in the early part of the third century. Later it became popularly known as Kodungalloor Bhagavati temple. The story of Kannaki is depicted in the Tamil epic *Silappathikaram*, written by the king's brother Ilanko Adikal. The story goes that Kovalan, a young man, and the beautiful Kannaki, both hailing from rich families in Kaveripattinam, fell in love and married. After a few years Kovalan became involved with another woman who was a famous dancer; her name was Madhavi. In time this relationship turned bad, and Kovalan squandered all his wealth to be finally rejected by Madhavi. The now contrite Kovalan had to return to his wife Kannaki, who was still devoted to him. They left home in search of fortune and reached Madurai, the capital of the Pandyan kings. As they had no money, they decided to sell one of Kannaki's gold anklets. While Kovalan was trying to sell the anklet in the bazaar, the king's soldiers arrested and killed him without a trial. It so happened that one of the queen's anklets that resembled Kannaki's was stolen and the soldiers were looking for the thief. Kannaki was overwhelmed with grief at the death of Kovalan. She confronted the king and queen in their palace and proved her husband's innocence. She then tore out one of her breasts and flinging it on the city, cursed the city of Madurai to be destroyed by fire. Her purity and chaste life made the curse come true and only the helpless and pious were spared. The goddess of Madurai then asked Kannaki to revoke the curse, which she did. Kannaki then returned to Kodungalloor and settled in the goddess's temple, which was then under the Chera dynasty. After severe penances she attained liberation.

In the seventh century there was a dispute about the worship in the temple among the local people. In the eighth century, during the reign

of Kulasekhara Varma, the king took a lead and helped in its smooth functioning. But later the idol of Kannaki was removed and the present idol of Bhadrakali was installed. The presiding deity Bhadrakali faces north and wears a mask, is eight-armed and made of jackfruit tree wood. The angry form of the goddess on the pedestal is about six feet tall; the right leg is folded against the left, which is upright in position. The goddess wears a crown. On the eastern side of the main shrine there is a secret and sacred chamber from which a door opens to the shrine. The temple stands in a large area filled with different kinds of big trees. Acharya Shankara came to this temple and demanded that all the people had equal rights to worship the goddess and acquire divine knowledge. It is believed that he also installed a Shri Chakra, symbol of the goddess.

Swami Vivekananda's Visit

During the end of November 1892 Swami Vivekananda came to Kodungalloor by boat from Thrissur.

At Trichur the Swami stayed only a few days. He next went to Cranganore (also called Kodungalloor), a place famous as a seat of learning and for its Kali temple. At Cranganore people saw him sitting, early one morning, under a banyan tree near the Kali temple. The Swami tried to enter the temple to offer worship to the deity; but the temple guards prevented him. Without getting annoyed, he returned to the tree after bowing down to the Devi from outside. His ochre robes and brilliant eyes attracted the attention of a young man, who approached him with the intention of having some fun; but the young man came away disappointed, when he found that the Swami was not as he had thought him to be. Just then two princes of the Cranganore palace, Kochunni Thampuran and Bhattan Thampuran, came to the temple, and the young man just mentioned brought them

to the Swami sitting under the banyan tree. The two princes were well versed in the scriptures. They could see from the Swami's features that he was not an ordinary person. When they approached him, he asked them why he was not allowed to enter the temple. They replied that it was difficult to know the caste of people, especially of those who came from outside Kerala, and therefore there was this custom. They had an argument in Sanskrit over the issue. The Swami, however, did not want to interfere with their local tradition, even though the princes were later prepared to allow a person of his calibre to enter the temple.

They argued with the Swami for two days, and were defeated. On the third day they approached the Swami with the desire to have his holy company. When they reached the place where he was, they found him meditating. They waited until he had finished. The glowing, calm appearance of the Swami reminded them of what the scriptures say about the man of meditation. After the Swami had come back to normal consciousness, he conversed with the princes in Sanskrit. When they took their leave, they made obeisance at his feet.

Then some of the learned women of the royal family came to meet the Swami and spoke with him in chaste Sanskrit. The Swami was surprised to find women speaking Sanskrit so fluently. In

no other part of India had he come across this. No doubt he was delighted to do so now.

On the fourth day the princes again went to the temple; but they were disappointed when they did not find the Swami under the banyan tree. He had left the town and gone towards Cochin. Some months later, when they saw the picture of Swami Vivekananda in the papers and read about his success in the Parliament of Religions at Chicago, they recognized him to be the monk with whom they had spoken under the banyan tree. Only then did they come to know his name.¹

Kodungalloor Bhagavati Kali temple is blessed by the visits of many sages and saints, the greatest of whom were Acharya Shankara and Swami Vivekananda. The banyan tree that Swamiji sat under is still standing near the temple. The presence of the devi is palpably felt and the temple today is one of the important shrines visited by thousands every day. The two annual festivals draw a huge number of devotees. ☸

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*Banyan tree under which
Swami Vivekananda
sat during his visit to
Kodungalloor Bhagavati
Kali temple*



Women's Status in Buddhism

Dr Chenchulakshmi Kolla

A WOMAN LIVES AND THINKS differently than a man because she is structured differently. Women are practical, down to earth, and each stage of her life as virgin, wife, mother, widow, or even being unmarried, has its own distinct experience and power. As a mother she is one of the great primordial archetypes of humanity. She has more vitality and resistance to disease, injury, and shocks than man. She is the originator of families, preserver of the established order, and perpetuator of traditions, which she imparts to her children. Through her the past is continued in the present and the future. She symbolizes the collective knowledge of the community. There is, however, a negative side of her nature: the tendency to draw men to their doom and bring woe to people. She also epitomizes all the lust of the flesh. A woman has the power to bring down homes, people, and sometimes even societies. She is the source of man's pleasure, but is herself insatiable. In many cultures a woman's presence during certain ceremonies was considered inauspicious.

Marriage in Buddhism

In so far as Buddhism deals with general causes and principles of things, it is a philosophy. But this philosophy demands more from its followers than mere intellectuality; it wants them to actualize this philosophy. This has made Buddhism not just a way of life but a well-structured religion. It is concerned with the true nature of humankind and the world around. It emphasizes that each human being irrespective of caste, creed, or station can attain the highest goal of life.

Thus, Buddhism is a universal religion that can be equally followed by men as well as by women. Buddha did not proclaim himself to be a messenger, or a prophet, or a supernatural being; he simply said that Buddha was a state of consciousness open to everyone. Buddhism emphasizes the noble eightfold path through virtue, concentration, and wisdom. Buddha preached all these on the basis of personal realization and experience.

At the time of the Buddha's birth in 563 BCE the old social order was giving way in many places to a growing economy, and new social and religious classes were being formed. Buddha was also a great social reformer, a believer in equality. His efforts for the emancipation of women and lower classes created an unprecedented revolution in India. Buddha honoured those women who did not neglect the care of the home.¹

Buddha saw marriage as a relationship with mutual rights and obligations, a relationship subject to the doctrine of karma, which teaches responsibility for one's own actions and thoughts. But starting as a monastic movement Buddhism sometimes decried women in general. Therefore, a Buddhist woman found herself sometimes praised and sometimes censured. Many times women played an important negative role in the early history of Buddhism—they were considered to be 'torches that light the way to hell'.² Buddha often described the defects and vices of women and warned monks to guard against them. In Buddha's time a women was contemptuously spoken of as one with *dvangulapanna*, two finger-length wisdom.

During those days girls were generally married

at the age of sixteen. Marriage was of three forms: *brahma*, where the bride's father arranged the marriage; *svayamvara*, in which the bride chose the groom; and *gandharva*, voluntary union between the maiden and her beloved. In the first case matchmakers used to approach the bride first to sound her out, and only after having her consent they made the proposal to her parents, as is found in the Pali account of Vishakha's marriage.³ *Svayamvara* was restricted to royal and noble families. The *gandharva* type was not uncommon; women who eloped with their men sometimes married or used to pass as wives without going through any formal matrimony (*ibid.*). Following the old customs auspicious days for marriage were selected to bring home or send forth the bride or bridegroom.⁴ There were rules restricting the marriage of all girls born at Vaishali to that city alone. Migara, a banker from Shravasti, gave his daughter Vishakha a dowry on the occasion of her marriage.⁵ The marriage of girls was celebrated with money given by the father to his daughter. Some admonitions were given to the girl after the marriage ceremony, while she was being sent to her father-in-law's house. As for a woman's love for decoration and ornaments we find a vivid description of Sujata, a treasurer's daughter from Saketa. She said that she was adorned in finery, garlands, and powdered sandalwood. Similarly, in the hymns of Nanduttara it is found how a woman had deep attachment for her ornaments.⁶

The prevalent practice was monogamy, as it was in Vedic times. Polygamy was a customary right of kings and nobles as well as of anyone who could afford to support more than one wife—for instance, kings Pasenadi, Udena, and Bimbisara. Polyandry was absent, but in the *Jataka* tales one comes across the princess Kanha, who was said to have had five husbands at the same time.⁷ This exception appears to form part of an exposition on a woman's faults. In most cases the

wedding ceremony was performed without the intervention of a *purohit*, priest, and was a domestic affair. The newly married girl used to go to dwell in her in-law's house in accordance with the joint family system. Fathers used to present their daughters with clothes, money, and other valuable articles. A man could also obtain a wife by paying her father for her. This was a modification of the *arsha* marriage, a Vedic practice.

In Buddhist countries like Burma, Ceylon, and Tibet women hold a remarkably good social status.⁸ In Buddhism marriage is not a sacrament. It is purely a secular affair and the monks do not officiate in it. The fidelity of women was also questioned; there is the instance of Queen Sambhula, who made a solemn declaration of her chastity in the same way as Sita had done while entering the fire to prove her fidelity to Rama.⁹

Kinds of Women

Buddha says that the woman who is beautiful in appearance, pleasing in manners, and of fine complexion, neither too tall nor too short, too thin nor too fat, too dark nor too fair, of surpassing human complexion, and possessing divine beauty is a jewel among women.¹⁰ The family in which parents are worshipped was a worthy family. A wife should not be held in common with another man. A wife who shares her husband's lot, be it rich or poor, the gods do praise her fame. A good wife can support her children and keep the household after the death of the husband by spinning cotton and scraping other women's plaited hair. A good husband is like a good wife. The *Jataka* tales mention different kinds of wives: destroyer-wife, thief-wife, mighty-wife, motherly-wife, friendly-wife, and slavish-wife. According to the *Vinaya Pitaka*, there are ten kinds of wives: (i) those who are bought for money, (ii) those who voluntarily live together with their husbands, (iii) those who are

enjoyed or made use of occasionally, (iv) those who have given clothes, (v) those who provide the house with a bowl of water, (vi) those who have put on a turban in order to carry vessels on their head, (vii) those who are slaves and wives, (viii) those who are artisans and wives, (ix) those who brought banners, and (x) those who are temporary wives.¹¹

The *Anguttara Nikaya* refers to the four qualities a woman should possess to obtain victory in the next life: skill in household duties, capacity to look after members of the family, capacity of doing everything to the liking of her husband, and thrift, that is, she must save wealth, gold, silver, and corn earned by her husband. It also mentions the qualities every women should possess: obedience to her husband; skill in spinning and weaving; capacity to supervise the work of menial servants and employees, of saving money, of taking refuge in the three gems [Dharmas], and of observing the five precepts.¹² The Pali Canon mentions good and bad wives. Wicked wives are not satisfied with their lot.

The royal harem was sometimes secretly dishonoured by wicked persons. The misconduct of Queen Pingiyani with a royal groom is an instance of a woman's infidelity. There were many ways to punish a wife's misconduct, among them death, imprisonment, and cleaving asunder.¹³ Female chastity finds a very important place in Buddhism and its violation was a serious offence. Buddha himself says that no woman or girl belonging to their clan [Shakya] was ever abducted by the Licchavi clans.¹⁴ Where there were co-wives, they quarrelled and disturbed domestic peace. Divorce was allowed but without any formal decree.¹⁵ Divorce was also permissible if either party was found guilty of adultery or unfaithfulness. Remarriage of women was not unknown in Buddha's time.¹⁶ But the texts are almost silent on the question of widow-marriage;

if it existed at all, it formed an exception rather than a rule.

The Buddhist funeral ceremony is a very simple affair that could be performed even by the deceased's widow or daughter, or anyone present. In Buddhism therefore there is no ritualistic or ceremonial need for a son to perform the last rites. In all patriarchal societies the desire for male offspring is very strong; in India especially, as the son is the one who lights the funeral pyre and saves his parents from hell. By doing away with this belief Buddhism has better room for sonless wives.

Self-supporting Women

Although the greater number of women were supported by their fathers, husbands, or children, one often finds references to self-supporting women who were engaged in various trades and professions like paddy-field keeper, cotton-field watcher (546), and cremation-ground guard¹⁷—there is even the description of a woman acrobat.¹⁸ Women also were garland-makers, artisans, and many even worked in the perfumery trade. But more numerous were the *dasis*, domestic female servants. They formed part of the property of most of the prosperous householders, though nowhere is it mentioned that these women were overworked. Prosperous householders had also in their retinue female musicians, as music played an important role in society. In Buddha's time there were famous and cultured courtesans like Ambapalli, Padmavati, Salavati Srima, Sama Salasa, and Addhakasi.

A servant woman could obtain freedom if she was able to prove herself worthy of it.¹⁹ These servants were found to be of a religious temperament. Besides, maid servants and good female nurses were aplenty. Five hundred nurses served King Bimbisara of Magadha when he suffered from fistula. The *Jataka* tales refer to dancing girls who were accomplished in dancing and

music. As many as a thousand dancing girls were employed by kings for royal amusement. One must not forget that such women were employed by King Shuddhodana to entertain the young prince Gautama.

In Vedic times married women participated with their husbands not only in religious rites but also in philosophical discussions. Girls were honoured by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law. Not much is known about female education during the Buddhist period, but as many of the women of higher classes were literate, we guess that they had their education at home. And it is seen that some women were not behind men in education; for instance, Khema, who had the capacity to grasp and unveil the true significance of Buddha's Dharma. In spite of a highly cultured and sophisticated way of life folk elements continued to exist in society, and women led the way in retaining these folk elements, which occupied a very important place in early Buddhist texts despite their strong ethical and philosophical sentiments. These folk elements give one a vivid picture of a woman's life in those times.

There had been female ascetics in Vedic times, but it was Buddha who opened the door of organized monasticism to women. There was of course an initial hesitation about allowing *bhikkunis*, nuns, but once it was done, a great opportunity was open to women that created a revolution in society. Buddha's foster mother Maha Prajapati and his wife Yashodhara were the first to be admitted into the Order. Many of Buddha's women disciples showed exemplary

character and high spirituality. Imagine a culture in which women can think beyond marriage and rearing children and dedicate their lives to realizing the highest truth!

According to Mahayana Buddhism, men and women equally have the Buddha-nature. This implicitly indicates that women were not religiously, psychologically, and physically inferior to realize this inherent nature. In the early period of Buddhism women were prohibited from realizing the five stations of being Brahma, Indra, a king, an emperor, or a Bodhisattva. The episode of the Naga princess in the *Lotus Sutra* illustrates the adherence to the belief in a woman's limitation. At a very young age the Naga girl became Buddha—the young age of the Naga princess suggests the innocence of the female. Enlightenment is possible in one's own lifetime and is a viable option for everybody regardless of age and gender. Buddha-hood is neither sudden nor gradual, male nor female, young nor adult. The Amitabha Buddha in Mahayana, who is metaphorically represented as either mother or father in Pure Land Buddhism—a devotional cult—is an example of the androgynous nature of this deity, which is popular all over East Asia.

Bhikkunis during a chanting session in a temple in Thailand



Women's Role Today

In general terms man's energies are directed towards seeking and conquests, whereas woman's energies are directed towards holding and forming. In olden days the position of women regarding education, profession, and choices were severely limited; now, with that old mould broken, the contrasts are not so vivid and sometimes the qualities of both sides overlap. Today the roles of women and men are not fundamentally different in society. The biological differences naturally persist and interdependence is necessary for their existence. Masculinity and femininity are two essential aspects of life and must express themselves as such. These differences are expressions of an ultimate sameness. Life becomes a tragedy if we neglect one over the other or make them perform the same functions. Each has its strengths and weaknesses.

The role of women in modern society is an issue of worldwide interest. In the recent past a number of books have been written on the changing status of women in Hindu and Islamic societies. But very little interest has been taken with regard to women in Buddhism. The position of women in early Indian society was an honourable one. They had access to the highest knowledge. There are even a few Rig Vedic hymns composed by women. In her husband's home, woman had an equal status that allowed her to participate in religious ceremonies. But with the passage of time and other factors this situation changed, and we see a marked downward trend in women's status as is reflected in the Brahmana literature. From then on the position of women had ebbed to the lowest level—she was considered only for childbearing, bereft of education and rights. This was the time when women needed a Buddha and a movement of considerable courage and spirit to pronounce a way of life that placed her on an equal level with man.

The key doctrine of attaining nirvana by one's efforts implies that woman is also eligible for it. Buddha comforted King Pasenadi of Koshala saying: 'A female offspring, O King, may prove even nobler than a male one,'²⁰ which is a revolutionary statement of his time by one whose heart was all compassion and wisdom. 

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Relevance of the Mahabharata

Dr Narendra Kohli

THE MAHABHARATA SPEAKS about eternal truths and deals with India's poetry, history, sociology, religion, and spiritual philosophy. It actually covers every aspect of human life and is not limited to any specific time, place, or people. Therefore, this priceless cultural and spiritual epic, which is the longest and most sublime of India's epics, now belongs to world culture. Since the journey of *mahakala*, great time, is unbroken, it would be wrong to believe that we have nothing to do with events that occurred in the past. Modern history may divide humanity's uninterrupted journey through time into distinct ages and periods, but spiritual literature does not. Like a sand dune, which has a constantly changing crest and a base that remains unchanged for thousands of years, the changes in society and human psyche are only superficial, while deep down the human being remains constant. The Mahabharata records the ancient and very present tale of the incessant battle that an individual wages against internal and external enemies. Greed, infatuation, power, and selfishness are forever constant and active; and if anyone wants to evolve, these negative trends have to be counteracted. In fact, one has to fight these intangible forces more within than outside oneself. And there is only one way to accomplish this: by following dharma. After delineating the path of dharma, the Mahabharata assures us of its fruit: *jivan-mukti*, freedom while still living. It also states that the struggle against negative inner forces is a sacred one and has to be undertaken religiously and honestly.

The Super Narrative

The Mahabharata narrates the saga of the Pandavas and is embedded with numerous complimentary stories and philosophical texts. Through them the epic establishes various personal, social, political, and spiritual values and illustrates life at many levels. The highest truths are put in a poetic form of extreme elegance, beauty, depth, and structure. The Mahabharata illustrates emotional ups and downs with astounding clarity and sincerity; it does not leave aside any one of them: envy, hate, beauty, romance, love, animosity, desire, lust, anger, excitement, fear, repugnance, grief, and so on. All these emotions are just as strong and relevant in individuals at present as they were then. Indian metaphysics believes that the entire creation is regulated by *ritam*, divine cosmic law. When considered within society and nature *ritam* is called dharma; and this dharma, when spoken in the context of laws governing individuals, is called satya, truth. Therefore, none of the basic laws change, and the narratives of the Mahabharata are as attractive today as they must have been in their own time.

In the epic's entire documentation of events, customs, and values the clash of opposing thoughts is exhibited. Both sides of the coin working on a single event or custom are presented. Many think that a number of social practices and values of that time are no longer relevant today. But the customs of polygamy; *parivedana*, the marriage of a younger brother before the older; *niyoga*, employing the brother or a close kinsman to raise children of a dead husband by marrying the widow; *svayamvara*,



Uttara and Abhimanyu as he goes off to the battle in which he will be killed, c.1930

a girl choosing her future husband by herself; and *harana-apaharana*, abducting an unmarried girl by one who wants to marry her, shown in the Mahabharata are also found in present day society with the same mental anguish or joy attending them. Not that all these customs were the current social practices, for monogamy was the normal custom, as it is now. In the cases of Satyavati and Kunti, who were unable to acknowledge that their sons were born prior to wedlock, they kept the identity of their children undisclosed, as it is also done today. Satyavati was Vyasa's mother, and Kunti was Karna's; eventually both the sons did learn about their real mothers and the circumstances regarding their births. These examples clearly demonstrate that during the Mahabharata time men and women

had learning, culture, and freedom enough to choose as they saw fit. King Dushyanta married Shakuntala in a *gandharva* type marriage, a mutual agreement between a woman and a man, which was acceptable in certain cases in those days. Today such marriages are commonplace and legal, and we do not think that the couple has violated dharma. The couple, however, may go through the same emotional pangs their ancestors went through; therefore, the narratives of the epic can be of help to modern society as well.

With regard to the cases discussed above twelve types of issues were allowed by the old Hindu laws, and whatever the circumstances children were born in, they were fully accepted by society, for life was held to be sacred. Of them four are: *aurasa*, legitimate son or daughter; *kanina*, son born of an unmarried woman; *kshetraja*, offspring of a wife by a kinsman or person duly appointed to raise an issue to the husband; and *dattaka*, adopted child. If *kanina* and *kshetraja* would have not been considered acceptable by dharma, then the tradition of *ni-yoga* too would have been rejected. Present-day research on stem cells, as also artificial insemination, test-tube babies, surrogate mothers, and sperm donors are a reality and we do not think that all this is wrong.

We see an amazing form of joint family system in the Mahabharata. There are no words like uncle or aunt used in it. The Pandavas never refer to Dhritarashtra or Vidura as uncles, they are addressed as father; Gandhari, Dhritarashtra's wife, and Paransavi, Vidura's wife, are considered mothers. Cousins are called and treated as brothers. Family values were always held above individual needs, and such joint families have existed for centuries in India. It is only in this and the previous century that family values have been weakened due to many factors, though even now any occasion is an excuse for all the

family members to congregate. This has a positive impact on nuclear families, which tend to break up easily and are prone to much tension and distress in the absence of a support system.

Dharma at the Core

The Mahabharata is primarily the saga of royal heroes, of whom Sri Krishna is the central and towering figure. And all the personalities that appear in it are used to teach dharma in relation to individuals, families, and society. In a number of places the definition of dharma varies, but nowhere in the epic is dharma defined as 'religion'. Dharma means that which holds things together, and the epic shows how sometimes the clash between individual dharma and higher forms of dharma arise due to various circumstances. For instance, when Sri Krishna was returning from his mission in Hastinapura, which was his last attempt to prevent the great Kurukshetra War, he visits Kunti. She tells him something of great importance, which was also a message for her son Yudhishtira: 'Regardless of what age or period the calendar claims to be, when the king rules with righteousness, the Satya Yuga appears; but if the king becomes immoral, then the Kali Yuga descends on earth.' For it was the duty of a king to protect dharma and not to be engaged only in his enjoyment. This high duty entailed great trouble and called for intelligence, judgement, and personality. Present-day rulers need to learn from such lessons.

Right from the beginning the Mahabharata emphasizes the struggle against injustice and immorality, highlighting that no one's rights should be deliberately snatched and that equality and justice were open to all. When a king like Jarasandha provides protection to the immoral, numerous tyrants like Kamsa are born and torture people. When a powerful ruler intoxicated with strength starts behaving as if his whimsical

wishes were his birthright, immorality begins to breed. Sri Krishna did not want Jarasandha's influence and excessive demands to grow to such an extent that people had to suffer. He started to control and restrict the forces of Jarasandha from the Kaurava capital of Hastinapura itself. Sri Krishna had sent Akrura to Hastinapura to find out if any injustice was being perpetrated against Kunti and her sons as well as to verify if there was any infringement of dharma. Duryodhana had tried to kill Bhima by poisoning him. Bhima was lucky to escape and survive. Kunti, disheartened, complained to Vidura about the attempt to assassinate her son, but Vidura, who understood what state-inflicted terror was, asked her to remain quiet for a while; for if she would have complained to the king, her other sons might have also become targets for assassination.

Sri Krishna realized that despite the presence of men like Bhishma, Drona, and Vidura, who understood dharma, the king of Hastinapura himself was at the root of adharma, and under his rule not only was adharma gaining ground, but tyrants like Duryodhana and Dushshasana were rising. If this adharma was not curtailed immediately, it could spread like wildfire and cause terrible destruction. This explains why in any age moral and righteous people suffer when a ruler is an immoral tyrant. Only if the king is righteous can adharma, to a great extent, be contained. It was nothing but Sri Krishna's efforts and military might that enabled Yudhishtira, the paragon of dharma, to be proclaimed heir to the throne. In the meantime started the threat of a joint attack by Jarasandha, Kalayavana, and Banasura on Sri Krishna's city Mathura. In spite of Sri Krishna being one of the extraordinary warriors of the time and knowing well that war is required for self-defence, he decided to remove himself from the conflict instead of forcing the innocent citizens of Mathura to ultimate



Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna confront Karna, c.1820

destruction. He emptied Mathura and left for Dwarka. One of Sri Krishna's many names is *ranachor-ji*, one who runs away from battle. Sri Krishna accepted this dishonour, but refused to be responsible for the deaths of countless innocent people. This is an example for armies and governments today. There is a difference between war and wanton destruction: unnecessary violence and barbaric behaviour should be avoided, no matter how great the cause for a battle may be. No soldier from any side should be subject to torture. During the Pandavas' first battle against Drupada, while Bhima was unleashing destruction on Drupada's army, Arjuna told Bhima that their aim was to capture Drupada and not to kill indiscriminately. Even prisoners were treated with kindness and were not held for ransom or used to put pressure on the opponent. War is always inhumane, but civilizations have always indulged in it, so much so that it has become a truism that war is a necessary evil when societies form. Even if this is taken as true, the Mahabharata shows the proper conduct in war and the way of humane treatment of the vanquished.

We must remember that people were just as greedy for wealth and infatuated with power then as they are now. As soon as the Yadavas and the citizens of Mathura left the city, Dhritarashtra started to look for a way to steal power from the Pandavas. His minister Kunika advised him to eliminate all others who claimed power—such are the requirements of politics. Dhritarashtra accepted his advice and immediately sent his sister-in-law Kunti and his brother's sons—who considered him as their father—to a house made of wax in Varanavata; his intention was to eventually set fire to that house. It was Vidura's attentiveness and skill, along with the good fortune of the Pandavas that prevented the assassination. All through history we find numerous battles among brothers or among fathers and sons for the sake of power. These incidents demonstrate how the events narrated in the Mahabharata are not unnatural or out of the ordinary, nor have they lost relevance. A smaller version of the Mahabharata is played out in today's homes and families. We live and breathe in the same world in which the epic's characters lived. Political crimes

are still a common facet of our world. One person's greed is responsible not just for the murder of enemies, but also of his or her near ones. Wars start first in the minds and in families and then spill on to the battlefields. The wars that are being waged today under different labels are comparable to the wars that caused the deeds of Jarasandha, Kalayavana, and Banasura, and the misbehaviour of Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana. If one reads the Mahabharata carefully, one discovers that it reflects also our own era.

Sri Krishna could not sit idle and watch the destructive nature of Dhritarashtra's greed. He could have punished Dhritarashtra outright for his evil actions, but that would have not solved all the problems and established dharma. Sri Krishna wanted a person who could replace Dhritarashtra and not stray from dharma under any circumstance. And Yudhishtira, the son of dharma, was that person. It is worth noting that Sri Krishna never attempted to seat his kinsmen on a throne, as there was a great possibility of civil war amongst the Yadavas if such a development would have taken place. After Dhritarashtra's attempt to burn alive the Pandavas in Varanavata, Sri Krishna gathered them to start the process of establishing dharma by installing Yudhishtira as emperor. Vidura and Vyasa assisted Sri Krishna directly and indirectly in this effort. This was essentially the front of dharma. He understood that the Pandavas would not survive if they continued to live under the authority of Dhritarashtra. It was essential for the Pandavas not only to live away from Dhritarashtra and build their own military might, but also to have some powerful allies. Sri Krishna's strategy led to consolidating family ties between the Pandavas and the Panchalas, traditional enemies of the Kauravas.

Sri Krishna managed to make the Pandava forces strong with the assistance of the

Panchalas and Yadavas. Once again the blind King Dhritarashtra dismissed the Pandavas' request for their rights and, in order to get rid of them, gave them sovereignty over a wild dominion called Khandavaprastha. Sri Krishna funded the construction of the Pandava kingdom with his own wealth, but advised them to keep god Indra pleased and on their side, as theirs was a nascent kingdom. Khandavaprastha was renamed Indraprastha. Despite these efforts Indra nurtured Pandava enemies in their own kingdom. The tradition to maintain spies and agents even inside friendly countries has still not faded away. When the Khandava forest was set ablaze, Takshaka and his family, who were Indra's agents, were discovered. Takshaka was a *naga*, considered a snake, and later in the Mahabharata the same Takshaka ambushed Arjuna's grandson Parikshit. When Sri Krishna and Arjuna were close to Takshaka in an attempt to eradicate him, Indra intervened directly and rescued Takshaka and his family. Many governments and societies still indulge in such behaviour.

The Great Yajnas

The episode of the *rajasuya* yajna in the Mahabharata is very significant. Most people do not hesitate to describe the *rajasuya* and *ashvamedha* as long lost and forgotten incidents of an ancient royal culture. It appears that the rishis started the practice of these two yajnas in the light of problems faced by various small kingdoms and democracies. In these yajnas the emperor does not take away the land or the rule of any king. Only allegiance to the emperor and taxes are accepted from the local ruler. The aim was to enable common citizens, traders, and travellers to go from one part of the country to another without obstacles and without being inconvenienced due to established boundaries.

of small states and kingdoms. Besides, kings would not start warring against each other for selfish and petty interests. Small kingdoms could also seek help from the emperor in case of external threat. As an example of this tradition there was the Maurya dynasty, which is considered to have been established to defend India from Alexander's armies. In the modern age also many governments have their own protectorates. The European Union is a new form of the same idea, in which all states within the union experience the convenience of easy travel, trade, and security by declaring a federation of sovereign states.

Sri Krishna prepared the Pandavas for a *rajasuya yajna* not just for strengthening their kingdom, but also with the intention to end the power of various immoral rulers. However, it is worth noting that Sri Krishna did not declare a large-scale war. He had already killed Kamsa, now it was necessary to eliminate the corrupt Jarasandha and Shishupala. Jarasandha had captured ninety-nine smaller kings and was getting ready to capture the hundredth, so that he could kill them all and declare himself an emperor. His death was necessary to free those ninety-nine kings, but a war with Jarasandha would have meant huge death and destruction for uncountable lives. Instead of attacking him directly Sri Krishna manoeuvres Jarasandha to agree to fight with Bhima. Bhima kills him. Sri Krishna then crowned Jarasandha's son Saha-deva as the ruler of Magadha and released the ninety-nine kings held in captivity. In this way, even before the *rajasuya yajna* took place, all these small and relatively weak kings started to care for their people.

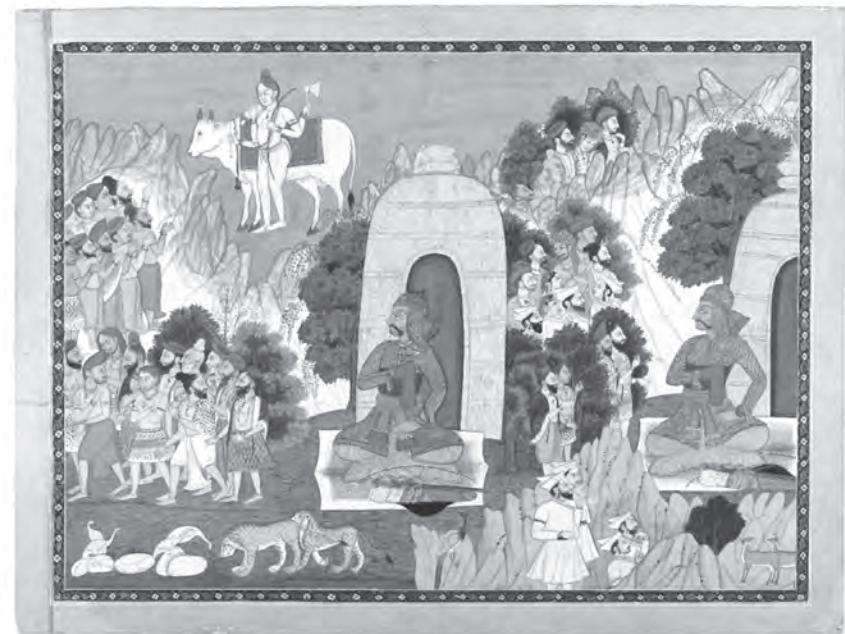
Sri Krishna killed Shishupala, a friend and ally of Jarasandha, with his *sudarshana chakra*, divine discus, before all the assembled kings on the occasion of the *rajasuya yajna*. Shishupala's

death was required for protecting dharma. He could have become uncooperative towards the Pandavas, opposed them, and eventually even become their enemy; there was, however, a higher reason: the first sign of the establishment of a moral administration is the protection of the life and dignity of the weak, the helpless, and women. In this gathering of kings Shishupala had been behaving impolitely right from the beginning with regard to the *agrapuja*, the one to be worshipped first. The grandsire Bhishma recommended Sri Krishna's name for *agrapuja*, and this was not acceptable to Shishupala, who started swearing and cursing. He said inappropriate things not only to Sri Krishna but to Bhishma as well. Yudhishthira and the other brothers took no effective steps to quiet him, and Bhishma also remained silent. Sri Krishna let Shishupala rant, but as soon as Shishupala swore against Rukmini, Sri Krishna flung his discus and beheaded him. Numerous incidents from Sri Krishna's life can be mentioned to show how he offered protection and safety to all women. The protection of a woman's honour and dignity is more relevant today than it was in the past.

With Sri Krishna on their side, the Pandavas were satisfied with their rapid progress and prosperity. Even after all the continuous family feuds Yudhishthira and his brothers did not differentiate between the Kauravas and the Pandavas and still considered all of them to be part of one family. Bhishma was their grandfather and they considered Dhritarashtra to be their common father. Perhaps this is the reason why the Pandava forces did not proceed towards Hastinapura prior to the *rajasuya yajna*. There is no point in conquering or collecting taxes from one's own kingdom! All dignitaries from Hastinapura were invited to the *yajna* and important responsibilities were given to

them. Not a single representative of the Panchalas, their traditional enemies, was visible in Indraprastha, despite the Panchala kingdom being Draupadi's maiden home. This was all arranged perhaps to please Bhishma, Drona, and Dhritarashtra. The Pandavas' attempt to maintain family unity appears to be at play here instead of politics. Duryodhana, despite being heir to the affluent state of Hastinapura, could not bear to see the prosperity of the Pandavas. Envy, malice, and greed are present in all ages and societies, but when they become part of politics, they give rise to terrible wars. The world has seen how major historical wars have been waged because of a few individuals who were spiteful, jealous, and proud.

Because of his polluted psyche and greed, Duryodhana uses all sorts of excuses and tricks to force his father Dhritarashtra to command Yudhishtira to play a game of dice. Dhritarashtra does just that. Yudhishtira joins the game even, though he is completely against gambling and also ignorant of how the game is played. And all this he did because Yudhishtira wanted to honour Dhritarashtra's command, who he considered his father and king. Yudhishtira loses his kingdom, brothers, himself, and eventually, forced by Shakuni who plays with loaded dice, wagers and loses Draupadi as well. If one examines the dice game episode illustrated in the Mahabharata in its entirety, one can understand how greed gives birth to injustice, and injustice and oppression lead to



'Arjuna's Penance', c.1825-40

circumstances that can trigger a war. Defeated in the dice game the Pandavas accepted the loss of their empire and the tremendous insult to themselves and to Draupadi. They were banished to the forests for twelve years, followed by a year of living incognito. They suffered all its inconveniences; they underwent all hardships and fulfilled dutifully all conditions. Despite being capable of waging a war, as by then they already had many powerful allies, they never entertained that idea. If the Pandavas were not restrained, there would have been violence during the gambling itself—Yudhishtira kept himself and his brothers under control. He tried to maintain peace even as he accepted the pain of indignity and suffering. Many societies and cultures at present have to tolerate disrespect from not only big but also smaller powers; Yudhishtira's example is worth emulating.

The Mahabharata, apart from its literary and spiritual value, brings home to everyone in the world the role and the need for dharma, following which elevates lives and nations and leads one to the goal of human life: mukti.





Kumbha Mela: Drawing Devout Millions

Swami Nirgunananda

WHERE DOES THE LARGEST gathering of people in the world occur? In India, during the Kumbha Mela, which means 'great fair'. This great religious fair is centred on a pot, but this pot is nowhere to be found in the fair. It is actually an allegorical or mythological pot containing the nectar that confers immortality. With faster and convenient modes of transport the number of people converging to participate in these great fairs is increasing every year. Electronic media has become a boon for numerous people who want to participate in spirit. The word 'fair' is not used in the sense of entertainment or carnival in which one can play and win prizes, ride huge machines, or do trade. The Kumbha Mela is one of the greatest acts of

faith drawing millions of people whose aim is to escape the inexorable wheel of samsara. People of all types, colours, backgrounds, languages, and religious affiliations arrive from cities, towns, villages, hills, dales, and forests to attain this *summum bonum* of life. The Kumbha Mela is held at a riverbank, and the strong belief that bathing at the auspicious moment with sufficient devotion and faith confers great merit makes devotees endure all inconveniences to joyfully participate in the fair. And during this time they become united in prayer, as the Rig Veda verse says:

Assemble, speak together; let your minds be all of one accord, as ancient gods unanimous sit down to their appointed share. The place is common, common the assembly, common

the mind, so be your thought united. A common purpose do I lay before you, and worship with your general oblation. One and the same be your resolve, and be your minds of one accord. United be the thought of all so that all may happily agree.¹

The other attraction of the Kumbha Mela is the blessing of seeing the congregation of an assortment of sannyasins, saints, yogis—millions of them from different denominations and sects from all over India and also the world. The sight is staggering and supernatural. The ambience in the fair is religious. The devout millions and millions are all disciplined. The fervour is high and the air intensely charged with devotion. This is India in the truest sense of the word.

Origins

Over the years a large number of people emigrated from the western side of India towards the Indo-Gangetic plains in the east, making the Ganga the converging point of culture and religion. People had always worshipped rivers as a giver of life and sustenance and had therefore endowed them with divine personalities who could be propitiated. One discovers this in all ancient world cultures that rose on the banks of rivers. In fact, the banks of perennial rivers have always attracted settlements.

The Vedic people have scanned the heavens, like other cultures, and mapped the stars as well. They have built their astronomy, which became part of their daily lives—it was the position of these constellations that told them the time for their Vedic sacrifices. They reached out to the gods and the heavens through these Vedic altars and yajnas. Mythologies also grew around gods, heavens, altars, and sacrifices to finally become part of common beliefs. Wonderful stories of beautiful gods and goddesses now entered in the collective mind of people. Auspicious times

were selected to perform religious works, pilgrimages, funeral obsequies, and so on. The Hindu world was not just this earth peopled by humans, animals, reptiles, and other living beings, it also included the invisible realms peopled by devas and devis, gods and goddesses; *pitrīs*, forefathers; gandharvas and *kinnaras*, celestial musicians; apsaras, nymphs; yakshas, mythical beings who have wealth; *siddhas*, immortals with supernatural powers; and so on. All these visible and invisible beings participate in the great cycle of existence. The sages had also calculated that on some auspicious conjunction of constellations the performance of particular activities could bring immense good results. They brought all the previous streams of thoughts and practices and declared the glory of the Kumbha Mela to make it a holy festival that cleansed the soul. People responded and participated in it joyfully. It is believed that the Kumbha Mela also draws the invisible divine and semi-divine beings for their own liberation.

In the Vedic literature one finds mention of the *kumbha*: 'Four *kumbha* (vessels) fourfold I give, filled with milk, water, and curds; let all these *dhara* (streams) come unto you, swelling with honey in the *svarga* (heavenly) world; let the *samanta* (complete) lotus-ponds approach you.'² The Kumbha Mela is associated with the mythological story of the churning of the *kshira sagara*, ocean of milk, by devas and asuras, demons, found in the *Skanda*, *Agni*, and *Matsya* Puranas, and in the Ramayana. The angry sage Durvasa was annoyed at the gods and cursed them to have wrinkles and grey hair. Alarmed, they went to Vishnu, who advised them that if they could obtain ambrosia from the ocean of milk, they would be able to escape this curse. Accordingly, the devas called the asuras for help, and with the mountain Mandara as the churning-rod and the snake Vasuki as a rope they began to churn. As the churning-rod had no support below, it began

to sink. Vishnu took the form of a turtle and placed himself under the Mandara mountain. But since the rod pushed higher, Vishnu took another form, the form of an eagle, and sat on top of it. The ocean of milk symbolizes the causal waters, from where all things arise. Thirteen precious and divine objects surfaced one after the other, and the fourteenth object was the golden *kumbha* of nectar. The gods and demons became mad with joy on obtaining it, because this would confer the immortality they were seeking for. In the meantime, under the instruction of Indra, king of the devas, his son Jayanta took the *kumbha* and fled. Shukracharya, the preceptor of the asuras, asked them to go towards the east to regain it before the devas. Accordingly, the asuras pursued Jayanta, but the gods also reached there. A twelve-day war started between them for the *kumbha*—these twelve days are equal to twelve human years.³ During this period the pot was kept, for safety, in twelve different places. Eight places were in heaven and four on earth. The places on earth were Haridwar, Prayag, Nasik, and Ujjain. A few drops of nectar are said to have spilled on these four places. Chandra, the moon

god, protected the nectar from spilling; Surya, the sun god, from melting; Brihaspati, Jupiter, from the asuras; and Shani, Saturn, from Jayanta himself drinking it. That is why when these four planets enter in conjunction the Kumbha Mela takes place in one of these four sacred places. The traditional belief is that at this auspicious time the whole atmosphere is laden with immortality and exerts a subtle influence on the mind. People undertake japa, dhyana, kirtana, charity, puja, yajna, study of scriptures, and the auspicious bathing ritual to absorb this immortality. It results in the cleansing of the negative karma a person has accumulated over many lifetimes, becoming thus fit for God's grace and moksha. It is also described in the Vishnu Purana that one bath in Kumbha-union gives the equal divine result of a thousand Ashwamedha and hundreds of Vajapeya yajnas and also a lakh times of going around the world.

Arrangements and Ambience

The *ardha*, half, Kumbha Mela is celebrated every six years and the *purna*, full, Kumbha Mela every twelve years in the four places mentioned

Tents at the 2010 Kumbha Mela, Haridwar



PHOTO BY EDSON WALKER / FLICKR

above. The *maha*, great, Kumbha Mela is celebrated once in every one hundred and forty-four years at Prayag, modern Allahabad. With innumerable people pouring in from all over India and the world the Kumbha Mela needs massive arrangements. The oldest extant record of a Kumbha Mela was during the reign of King Harshavar-dhana (590–647 CE). But this festival goes back to the earliest times unrecorded; and we have the example of Acharya Shankara, who systematized the Kumbha Mela and made it a rule for all the denominations of monks he had organized to meet during the fair and settle scriptural and religious doubts.

Apart from outbreaks of infectious diseases and stampedes that broke out at times in the past, the fair is peaceful. The huge concourse of people transforms these grounds into a city for a few weeks. All civic, security, and travel arrangements are put in place. The ruling kings used to do all the necessary arrangements to provide a joyful gathering; now it is the government's duty to cater for it, and many religious, non-governmental, and monastic communities pitch in to help. A formidable city of huge tents quickly springs up. Innumerable ashramas and *akhadas*, places where *naga*, naked, sadhus live; *dharmashalas*, charity homes; and hotels accommodate devotees. Free kitchens supply food to the crowds.

Before the propitious time of the ritual bath devotees have already settled in this improvised city. They bathe early in the river, chant hymns, spend their day in *japa* and *dhyana*, and attend



Meeting of sadhus at the 2010 Kumbha Mela, Haridwar

the numerous places where scriptures like the *Bhagavadgita*, *Upanishads*, *Bhagavata*, and *Ramcharitmanas*, are expounded. Day and night loudspeakers broadcast Vedic mantras, bhajans, and hymns. From early morning people visit monasteries, sadhus, and mahatmas, great souls, for spiritual instructions. In the evening they participate in the aratis conducted in various permanent and makeshift shrines as well as at the bank of the river. In this way an intense spiritual atmosphere is created. Those who can afford feed sadhus, themselves joining in the task.

The multitude of colours is magnificent, though it contrasts with the cloud of dust raised by millions of feet, in spite of the regular wa-tering of the fairgrounds. Added to this is the smoke of thousands of small fires used by families to cook their simple food—many carry provisions and vessels with them. Most of the devout have no more possessions than a small bundle of clothes. They sleep in the various tents and some even out in the cold. There is gaiety in the air too: women sing their folk songs and hymns while clapping hands. There is dancing



Procession of sadhus during the 2010 Kumbha Mela, Haridwar

and laughter and shouting of salutations and making of prostrations to sadhus. The old and the sick are either supported or carried around. Wide-eyed and restless children scamper around while their mothers yell at them to stay close. During this period people feel inclined to be better disposed, patient, and forgiving. There is less artificiality and everyone behaves more spontaneously. Watchtowers continuously scan the crowd, keeping a close watch on the movement of people to avoid stampedes.

The highlight of the Kumbha Mela is of course the procession of sadhus towards the river for their ritual bath at the auspicious time. The present government follows the same rules laid down years ago by the British government in deciding upon the order of monastic groups proceeding for the royal ritual bath. The *akhada parishad*, council of *naga* sadhus—that has Niranjani, Nirvani, Juna, Ananda, Avahan, Pancha-agni, Atal, Udasin, Vairagi, Nirmal, among others—also follows the rules. The authorities fix other times than those assigned to sadhus

for the devotees to take their holy bath, which also helps people watch the procession of sadhus and their ritual bathing. The paths leading to the river are packed with people, as far as the eye can see, all shouting their praises while the sadhus in glittering processions head towards the river. There is great delight in watching so many sadhus in different attires, belonging to different orders, decked with garlands, young

and old, all marching peacefully towards the river. The ambience created at this time is so intense that it seems all the celestial denizens have also come to witness this unique sight.

Conclusion

It is stated in the scriptures that those who take bath in the auspicious moments of the Kumbha Mela also reap the result of visiting and bathing in all other *tirthas*, pilgrimage places, as all the *tirthas* appear here in subtle form. Such fortunate ones become free from the worldly bondage of birth and death and gain immortality. All over India there are other religious fairs that also have a similar aim and spirit of participation, but the Kumbha Mela is unique as it has been drawing large numbers of people for thousands of years.



References

1. Rig Veda, 10.191.2-4.
2. Atharva Veda, 4.34.7.
3. See *Skanda Purana*, 8.7.

Sri Ramakrishna: The 'New Man' of the Age – IV

Swami Bhajanananda

(Continued from the previous issue)

6. Setting in Motion a New Spiritual Movement

THE WORK OF AN AVATARA IS NOT for a few years but for centuries or even millennia. He ensures the continuance of the new spiritual tradition for such a long period. In the case of Sri Ramakrishna, the perpetuation of his mission on earth has been ensured in several ways: through a new monastic order that he founded, through a community of lay devotees, and through various other institutions.

(i) The New Monastic Order

Only an order of monks can dedicate themselves fully and selflessly to the task of propagating an avatara's message and sustaining his mission for the welfare of humanity for centuries. This was the reason why Sri Ramakrishna was eager to bring into existence a new monastic order during the closing months of his physical life on earth. He is the real founder of the Ramakrishna Order. Although mainly Swami Vivekananda was instrumental in the formation of this new monastic order, he played his part in accordance with the instructions received from Sri Ramakrishna. Like the message of Sri Ramakrishna, the new monastic order too came as the culmination of three to four thousand years of Indian culture.

Monasticism probably originated in India. The Rig Veda, which is the oldest living scripture in the world and is dated between 2000 and 1500 BCE, mentions *muni* and *yati* in several places. These words refer to homeless ascetics or monks who led a wandering life.

Quite different from these wanderers were the spiritual teachers known as rishis or seers. The rishis we come across in the Rig Veda were composers of hymns and songs, whereas the rishis we meet in the Upanishads were illumined teachers who discovered transcendental truths about the ultimate Reality. Most of these rishis were married people who nevertheless led disciplined and austere lives in hermitages known as ashramas. Spiritual seekers flocked to these ashramas and lived with them as their disciples.

Monasticism became a well-defined and disciplined way of life with Buddha in the sixth century BCE. Some of the major contributions made by Buddha to the development of the monastic ideal are as follows: (a) he started a large-scale induction of people, without the distinctions of caste or class, into monastic life; (b) he organized monks into a distinct order known as Sangha; (c) the lives of monks came to be regulated by strict moral rules and codes of conduct; (d) he sent monks to different places as missionaries to preach Buddhist Dharma—two thousand five hundred years later all these features were revived and incorporated into Ramakrishna monasticism by Swami Vivekananda.

Buddhist monasticism exerted influence on Hinduism, but regarding the extent of this influence there is no unanimity of opinion. One visible sign of this influence was the gradual replacement of the rishi ideal by the sannyasin ideal. According to some scholars, the adoption of sannyasa as the

'fourth stage', *caturtha-āśrama*, of life in Hindu social structure took place after Buddha. Under Buddhist influence a negative attitude towards life began to pervade Indian life and thought.

With Acharya Shankara in the eighth century CE Hindu monasticism acquired an independent status, a distinct identity, and great prestige. Shankara's life-work had a threefold aim: (a) to establish Advaita as the highest Truth and ultimate goal of life; (b) to bring out the true spiritual import of Vedantic scriptures and establish their supremacy by interpreting them in a logical, consistent way, within the philosophical framework of Advaita; and (c) to establish a new type of monastic life, known as Math, in four parts of India, to serve as centres for the cultivation, preservation, and propagation of Vedantic knowledge. A Math is a monastic institution with a single sannyasin whose functions are similar to those of a bishop. There is a permanent arrangement for worship in a Math, which thus serves as a centre for the harmony of *jnana* and *bhakti*. Shankara introduced the scholarly tradition into monastic life and made sannyasins learned spiritual teachers.

The next stage in the development of Hindu monasticism was inaugurated by the great scholar-monk Madhusudana Sarasvati. He opened the doors of sannyasa to people belonging to all castes and started a new way of monastic life known as Akhada. Originally conceived as a militant order—like the Hospitallars and Templars of Medieval Europe—an Akhada is a huge monastic institution in which a large number of monks live in a loosely-knit collective life under a powerful abbot-like monk called Mahant.

Islamic mystics known as Sufis are generally married people and therefore, strictly speaking, cannot be regarded as monks. From the twelfth century onwards several Sufi orders, such as Qadiriyyah and Naqshbandiyya, were introduced into India from the Middle East, while a few

others, such as the Chistiyya and Suhrawardiyya, developed indigenously. Christian monasticism of the Eastern tradition existed in the southern part of India, now known as Kerala, from the sixth century. With the coming of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, several Roman Catholic monastic orders—such as the Carmelites, Jesuits, Benedictines, and others—were introduced into India.

It is against this vast and complex background of so many different monastic traditions, all of which are thriving but each with a particular vision, that we have to understand the significance of the establishment of a unique monastic order known as the Ramakrishna Order—Ramakrishna Math in Indian languages—by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

The historical significance of the event lies in the fact that the rise of the new monastic order took place at a most critical period in the history of Indian culture. In the second half of the nineteenth century many spiritual, religious, social, cultural, and even political forces were pulling society in different directions. There was a great need for a new spiritual centre to gather up the scattered spiritual forces of the nation, to unify the different strands of Indian culture, a centre to bring about inter-religious and intra-religious harmony, a centre to act as a link between the ancient and the modern and as a bridge between the East and the West, a centre to initiate and sustain a spiritual resurgence and social awakening, a centre to propagate among humanity the new avatara's message of faith, purity, strength, love, and service. From a historical standpoint it may be seen that the establishment of the Ramakrishna Order or Math came as the fulfilment of the need for such a living spiritual centre.

Recent observations have shown that monasticism as a whole is now on the decline all over the world, especially in the West. As a part of the

spiritual renaissance associated with Sri Ramakrishna, the rise of the Ramakrishna Order may in future prove to be a historical process of rejuvenation of monasticism in the whole world. For the millennia-old monastic tradition of India the Ramakrishna Order signifies not only a process of self-renewal but the beginning of a new era. Ramakrishna monasticism is in several respects a new concept of the monastic ideal. Some of the notable features of this new way of monastic life are briefly stated below.

(a) Universal Outlook

We have seen that Hindu monasticism has three main patterns: the ashrama, a more or less temporary abode for a guru and his disciples, the Math, a permanent establishment with a single monk and having regular arrangements for worship, and the Akhada, a very large loosely-knit monastic community. The Ramakrishna Order does not conform to any of these patterns, though it includes some of the good aspects of all of them. It also includes some of the good aspects of Buddhist and Christian forms of monasticism. This does not, however, mean that the Ramakrishna Order follows a syncretic monastic ideal. It follows an independent ideal that comes nearest to a universal monastic ideal. This universalism is not an outer show of liberalism or a means of obtaining the support of people. The universalism of the Ramakrishna Order is based on the Vedantic principle of unity in diversity realized by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda as a fundamental fact of life and existence.

(b) Modernity

Monks of the Ramakrishna Order are engaged in different kinds of social services. This calls for social mobility and interaction with the society at different levels. To facilitate these matters the monks follow a modern way of life such as the use of tailored clothes, of modern amenities and modes of travel, and so forth.

This modernization of the lifestyle has been done without compromising the basic ideals and values of monastic life. The two basic principles of sannyasa are renunciation and looking upon oneself as the Atman.

As regards the first principle, renunciation, traditional Hindu monasticism gives much importance to its external signs. Sri Ramakrishna regarded external signs of renunciation unimportant. He considered renunciation of lust and wealth to be true renunciation. He used to say: 'There is no harm in chewing betel-leaf, eating fish, smoking, or rubbing the body with oil. What will one achieve by renouncing only these things? The one thing needful is the renunciation of "woman and gold". That renunciation is the real and supreme renunciation.'⁴ This teaching of Sri Ramakrishna is strictly followed in the Ramakrishna Order. In fact, chastity and non-possession of wealth are two of the several vows the monks take, even during their novitiate, and they keep these two vows unbroken all through their lives.

The very basis of a sannyasin's renunciation is the Vedantic principle that the human's true Self is neither the body nor the mind but the Atman, which is inseparable from the supreme Self known as Brahman or Paramatman. Sannyasa does not mean only renunciation of external objects but also renunciation of identification with one's body, *dehātma-buddhi*. This false identification is the root of all forms of attachment, hatred, fear, egoism, and the like. A true sannyasin gives up this and identifies himself with his true Self or Atman, which is ever-pure, ever-free, ever-blissful, eternal, and infinite. True Self-knowledge protects the sannyasin from the false appearances, attractions, illusions, and pitfalls of worldly life.

The two principles of renunciation and Self-knowledge enable the monks of the Ramakrishna Order to adapt themselves to the

conditions, needs, and demands of the modern world as well as to lead an absolutely pure and holy life wholly devoted to God, even while discharging the duties of monastic life and engaging themselves in various kinds of service activities for the welfare of others all through their lives.

(c) Discipline and Freedom

The Ramakrishna Order has been established by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda not only for a few years; with its foundations deep in the spiritual traditions of India, it is built to last centuries. A monastic organization can last for centuries only if it is governed by strict discipline and integrity and is sustained by perennial spiritual logistics. The disciplined life that the monks lead is based on definite rules and regulations originally formulated by Swami Vivekananda himself. It is the first, and perhaps the only, monastic order within the Hindu tradition that is governed by a written rule and not merely by traditions and conventions.

Swami Vivekananda has said: 'Liberty is the first condition of growth.' What is the scope for freedom in monastic life if it is governed by strict rules? Now, freedom is of two kinds: external and internal. External freedom is freedom to move about as one pleases and do whatever one likes. It is over this freedom that many of the conflicts and quarrels take place in the family, in the workplace, in society, in political circles. Internal freedom refers to three kinds of inner freedom. The first one is freedom from slavery to desires, to impulses, to instinctual drives. The second one is 'free will'—as St Augustine has stated, by 'free will' is meant a will that is so completely free from bad thoughts that it can think only good thoughts and can turn freely towards God. The third type of inner freedom is freedom from dogmatism and prejudice, freedom to know the thoughts of great people, to study different systems of philosophy and different religions,

freedom to pursue one's own spiritual path.

The rules and regulations of the Ramakrishna Order impose restrictions on external freedom but not on inner freedom. Monastic life helps the monks of the Order to develop their inherent potentialities and higher creativity by exercising their inner freedom.

(d) Synthesis of Yogas

It is to facilitate the development of inner potentialities that Swami Vivekananda introduced a synthesis of yogas into monastic life. Sannyasins of *dashanami* orders generally follow Vedanta as a philosophy and way of life and adopt *jñāna-mārga* as the means of mukti. Vaishnava sadhus follow the path of bhakti, and those among them who study scriptures do so in order to strengthen their devotion.

The Ramakrishna Order follows a twofold synthesis: synthesis of Vedanta and yoga, and synthesis of four yogas. Each yoga is based on the development of a particular faculty. Synthesis of yoga aims at the development of all the faculties. Swami Vivekananda saw in Sri Ramakrishna the perfection of all the yogas and considered Sri Ramakrishna to be the ideal of human development. Swamiji wanted the monks of the Ramakrishna Order to attain an integral development of all the faculties through the practice of a synthesis of yogas and become fully functioning individuals.

(e) Service as a Way of Life

In the Ramakrishna Order service is not a matter of mere duty or obligation but a way of life, a natural way of living in the world. This acceptance of service is based on certain philosophical principles. To understand these principles it is necessary to first understand the traditional view of work prevalent among conservative sannyasins.

Since work involves a threefold division in consciousness, namely, the knower, knowledge,

and the object to be known—*jñātā, jñāna, jñeya*—Advaitins regard work as a product of *ajñāna*, primordial ignorance. Moreover, by virtue of their renunciation of the world, conservative sannyasins regard themselves as above the compulsions of work and social obligations.

Swami Vivekananda opened a new approach to work that supersedes the above view. In the first place Swamiji showed that karma need not be a product of ignorance. Karma or karma yoga can be done as an expression of the knowledge of our true nature as the Atman, which is inseparable from Brahman. He described this process as the 'manifestation of the potential divinity of the soul'. Every kind of work can be done with this knowledge. Work done with the knowledge of the Atman does not cause bondage.

The second point is that everywhere in the Upanishads Brahman is spoken of as immanent in all beings. But traditional Advaitins ignored this fact and gave all importance to the transcendent aspect of Brahman. As a result the illusoriness of the world came to be emphasized. It was Sri Ramakrishna who restored the original Upanishadic idea of the immanence of Brahman in creation, and he added that although Brahman as God dwells in all beings His greatest manifestation is in the human being. Therefore, the best way to worship God is to worship Him in the human being. Sri Ramakrishna asked: 'If God can be worshipped through an image, why shouldn't it be possible to worship Him through a living person?' (687). This means service to the human being is to be regarded as service to God: *Śiva-jñāne jīva sevā*, as he put it.

Swamiji applied this doctrine on a large scale in the social field. All the service activities of the Ramakrishna Order are done in the spirit of worship to the living God. The monks of the Order do different types of service in society not out of a sense of duty or obligation or compassion, but

as an expression of their selfless love for God in people. For them all work is spiritual discipline, a natural way of leading the spiritual life.

Doing work as worship is not a new idea. It was first taught by Sri Krishna in the Gita. For instance: '*Svakarmanā tam-abhyarcya siddhim vindati mānavah*'; by worshipping (the all-pervading) God with one's own work, human beings attain the ultimate goal of life.⁵ What Sri Ramakrishna added was to worship God in the living person, to serve the living person as God, to regard service to the living person as service to God.

Swamiji's special contribution was to make the poor, the downtrodden masses, and the sick and suffering people the focus of service activities. He was the first religious leader in modern India to speak for the neglected masses. Even now service to the poor is given priority in the service programmes of the Ramakrishna Order.

(f) Brotherly Love

As was pointed out earlier love, *prīti*, is considered to be a cause of attachment and bondage in Buddhism and Hinduism. Hence, in Buddhist and traditional Hindu monasteries the relationship among monks is of the nature of fellowship, friendliness—*maitri*—mutual help and support, and devotion to a common guru or ideal.⁶ In such a situation love is reserved for God alone. But as we know from the Upanishads it is only the lower type of love, based on the unity of *prāṇa*, that causes bondage. There is a higher type of love based on the unity of the supreme Self in all beings. This divine love liberates a person from lower desires and selfishness and also develops into universal love for all and *parā-bhakti* for God.

Sri Ramakrishna, who recovered the Vedic ideal, radiated this pure divine love and transmitted it to his disciples. That stream of pure spiritual love is the primary force unifying all the members of the Ramakrishna Order, who have different temperaments and diverse cultural

and religious backgrounds. The role of the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi in the development, integrity, power, and continuity of the Order is so important that it needs to be treated separately. Here we only mention that the boundless love of her all-inclusive, all-forbearing, all-forgiving, great mother heart is also a major force holding together the ever-expanding monastic Order. The universal love of Sri Ramakrishna, the Holy Mother, and the direct disciples of the Master is a living and enlivening tradition in the Ramakrishna Order, which has no parallel in the modern world. Relationship among the monks of the Order is based on this divine love.

(g) Centred around Sri Ramakrishna

The whole Ramakrishna Order is centred around Sri Ramakrishna. He is the be-all and end-all of the members of the Order. Their individual and collective lives are oriented to him as their end and means. Swami Vivekananda has described the Ramakrishna Order as the 'mystical body of Sri Ramakrishna'. The Order serves as the main channel for the flow of Sri Ramakrishna's grace and power in the world for the welfare of all people. On the occasion of consecrating the newly acquired grounds of Belur

Math, in December 1898, Swami Vivekananda said: 'The spiritual force emanating from here will permeate the whole world, turning the current of men's activities and aspirations into new channels. From here will be disseminated ideals harmonizing Jnana, Bhakti, Yoga and Karma.'⁷

This Ramakrishna-centredness does not contradict or limit the universal outlook of the Order. The reason for this is that Sri Ramakrishna represents the universal prototype of divinity on earth, and he can be identified with the impersonal, *nirguna*, aspect or with any of the different personal, *saguna*, aspects of the ultimate Reality. That is to say, he can be worshipped in any form as the 'God of all'.

(To be concluded)

Notes and References

4. M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 291.
5. Bhagavadgita, 18.46.
6. It may be pointed out here that the basis of Christian monasticism is love, but it is based on different principles.
7. His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 2 vols (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2008), 2.400–1.

He [Sri Ramakrishna] appeared to be an ordinary person, but his facial smile was unique. I have never seen the like of it. When he smiled or laughed, it appeared as if the wave of *ānanda* was flowing through his eyes, face and even the entire body. And that divine blissful smile removed from one's heart all the miseries for ever. His voice was sweet, so sweet that one desired to just keep sitting and listen to his voice only, a voice which 'poured nectar on the ears'. His eyes were bright, his look very sharp and affectionate. When he looked at others, it appeared as if he could see the inside (mental make-up) of them. At least I used to feel that way.

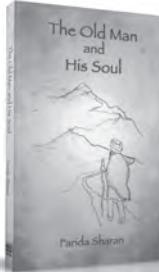
I felt that there existed deep and tangible tranquillity in his room. All those present seemed to be enchanted with bliss while listening to the words which poured from the Master's lips. I distinctly recall that picture of tranquillity in his room although I do not remember what conversations took place that afternoon.

I was sitting in a corner, looking, listening and experiencing an indescribable bliss. I did not pay heed to the conversations. I was only looking at him with rapt attention. He did not say anything to me, nor did I ask him anything.

—Swami Vijnanananda
and his Paramahamsa-carita, 22

REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,
publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications



The Old Man and His Soul

Farida Sharan

Akshaya Prakashan, 208 M G House,
2 Community Centre, Wazirpur
Industrial Area, Delhi 110 052. E-mail:
harish@akshayaprakashan.com. 2010.
ix + 148 pp. ₹ 180.

The book recounts the journey of an elderly man, essentially a spiritual seeker, who leaves home and journeys through deserts and forests of North India seeking the meaning of life and a peaceful death. The narration is in the form of a novel and makes a simple, yet thoughtful reading. The outer journey ends when the man discovers inner bliss.

Though the motive of the old man's renunciation is the anguish of separation from his late beloved wife and the hurt inflicted by the change of attitude towards him by his son and daughter-in-law, he seems to be a genuine seeker probing the meaning of life and death. His journey confers him bliss, spiritual enrichment, and a sense of accomplishment. At last his journey leads him to his guru, who dedicates him to the mission of selfless service. Before dying he has clearly understood the meaning of life and death, with his internal world anchored in meditation and his outer world in devotion and service.

The author articulates the old man's personal trials, challenges, and inner spiritual transformations with clarity and insight, creating a tapestry of his reflections vis-à-vis the places he travelled. If the reader is also a spiritual seeker, he or she can easily relate with the old man, his search, his feelings, and his revelations. The contents are divided into two sections: 'Seasons of Seeking' and 'Seasons of Service', which become beautifully subtle as they weave in and out of the old man's experiences while he moves into his final phase. The first Indian edition of this book offers an accessible, interesting, and easy read, with plenty

of vivid descriptions. *The Old Man and His Soul* is a worthy map to all who venture into a similar spiritual terrain.

Dr Chetana Mandavia

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The Linguistic Atom and the Origin of Language

Gouri Dharmapal,
ed. Gautam Dharmapal

Ritam, 9/2 Fern Road, Kolkata
700 019. 2010. xii + 269 pp. ₹ 300.

Once in a while we come across a book that jolts one's complacent awareness of Indian thought, culture, and tradition. The jolt becomes a surprise that crystallizes into the sheer joy of relishing an enormous richness and resilience of perceptions of speech, hermeneutics, symbols, and poetry as primordial speech. And this entire exercise is made better by describing the savants, sages, and saints who stood sentinel over these traditions.

To put it another way, somewhat insensitively, what is now current in Indian pedagogic structures is STEM—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. This book suggests how the ancient Indian language and philosophical systems underlie STEM, albeit partially hidden, sometimes totally hidden, and at times outrageously thrown overboard. But like science, there is also a meta-science of unity and diversity; the technology of togetherness without any hegemonic privileging; the engineering creativity and consciousness as the nucleus of discovery and invention; and mathematics, in its original sense, as learning that naturally bases itself on teaching, its inalienable twin.

The nucleus of all this is *bhasha*, language, and it is the cosmic atom that precedes even languages proper, such as Sanskrit. Dr Gouri Dharmapal's

study presents us with, as it were, the Hiranya-garba, Golden Womb, from which all creative forms emerge. Explaining the range and sweep of the 'atom', she says: 'Each linguistic atom of the individual speech is a miniature (which however is a completely relative term, because even seen from the proper proximity an atom will look as big as a solar system and the latter seen from the proper distance will look as an atom) solar system of which the individual soul is the moving Sun round which the EXPRESSION revolves in an infinite spiral. The sounds, words, phrases etc. that form part of this speech are the compounds of the linguistic atoms' (13). 'How to understand this atomic structure?' questions the author, and then suggests: 'By keenly listening to it with all your heart, by being approximate to it in love, by śraddhā, faith. There is no other way to knowledge, to self, to SELF KNOWLEDGE. SELF meaning the infinitely expanding I-angle, gradually embracing but never getting to the end of ALL physically' (14). How one wishes our corporate soft-skill trainers, who teach listening skills, look at the phenomenon of listening as not mere hearing. An apparent flaw in listening and consequent shooting of Shravana with an arrow brought immense grief to Dasharatha and unfolded the entire saga of the Ramayana!

This listening requires more than hearing. Putting the essence of it tersely the author says: 'Upa-nishad (approximation) and Darśana (vista-vision) is the only way to know a person or an animal or a bird or a tree or an insect or a people or a country or an object or any part of this creation—not vivisection' (ibid.). The implications are explored in eight chapters, which the author calls 'light-waves': the explication of the linguistic atom; the light-waves focus on Vedic texts and their rites reflecting the life based on them; Vedic poetry; leadership in the Veda; Veda and yajna; the light of Panini; o-live culture in the light of the Veda and Panini; the discovery of Panini; and *chandas*, *bhasha*, and *bangla*. Also included are the very helpful graphics and charts.

From the topics mentioned above one is likely to think that the book is a kind of Vedic exegetical hermeneutics à la Sri Aurobindo and Sri Anirvan. To some extent it is, but the dominant concerns of the study embrace Vedic truths as exemplified

in the daily lives of a people whose culture and civilization stand testimony to this truth. I would suggest the chapters on 'Culture in the light of Veda and Pāṇini' and the one on 'Leadership in the Veda' to corporate executives especially.

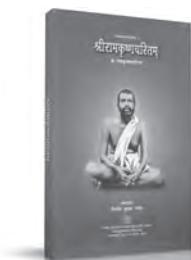
In this regard the weaving of these truths into the texture of day-to-day lives of saints and sages as also poets and thinkers makes the study free from all those abstractions that pass off as Indian cultural ethos. Dr Gouri stabs her toes on the concrete minutiae of culture, religion, art, and literature at every step of her study. Her exposition of the continuity and persistence of these perennial themes is in several places an eye-opener. For instance, Sri Ramakrishna figures in several contexts as a glorious exemplar of Vedic truths. Explaining *bhasha* and *chandas*, metres, Dr Gouri says: 'The inner vast resplendent illumination is the criterion by which *Chandas* is differentiated from *Bhāshā*. The dimension of the language suddenly changes when a Rishi climbs to the peak of *Bhāshā*. Pedestrian speech begins to fly with wings. Rāmprasād's songs to Kāli, the Time, Rāmakrishna's *Kathāmrīta*, Bankim's *Vande Mātaram*, Robindranāth's gleanings of poetry, symbolic dramas and *Gitavītān*, Vivekānanda's poems and speeches, Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*, the Grand Epic of Mahā-Prithvī, as his other works are examples of Rishi-speech, i.e., *Chandas*' (97). It is this continuity of manifest forms and figures, themes and aspects, that is the substantial truth behind the significance of this study. Dr Gouri illustrates this point citing Sri Ramakrishna's *upamaṇa*, analogy—or we can say *upameya*, to be compared—stating that all these discussions and speeches would be *a-phala*, fruitless, mere talk, if we do not take the fruits and flowers out of it in our daily social and political life. In the words of Sri Ramakrishna: we are killing time in the statistics of mango gardens with trees, branches, and leaves without eating the delicious mangoes.

Similarly, significant is the attractive summary of Sri Ramakrishna's image of a *hat*, marketplace, specially of a village: 'All things, all sounds, all words are separate. But, at a distance, All is harmonised in Om, a single humming sound. From thence to Silence. Not even whisper. No muttering. Not even mental speaking. Complete Silence,

SAMĀDHĪ' (193). *Anahata*, the unstruck sound, and the marketplace fused together!

This is the overall ambience of this remarkable study. There are several nuggets of gold illumined with an intimacy, inwardness, and above all, holistic awareness that makes this book stand out as a cyclopedia of Indian culture's range, resilience, and sweep. In short, a book for an in-depth study and absorption in earnest, both leading to pragmatic activism.

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Former Head, Department of English,
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Sri Ramakrishna Charitam
K Ramakrishna Warrier

Chinmaya International Foundation,
Shodha Sansthan, Adi Shankara
Nilayam, Veliyanad, Kerala
682 319. Website: www.chinfo.org. 2010.
vi + 117 pp. ₹ 160.

Every religious movement gives rise to new thoughts and sentiments. This in turn inspires literature and the arts. Sanskrit as a language has proved itself and is a powerful medium in the field of metaphysics, philosophy, and aesthetics. In fact, the test of every thought is the Sanskrit language. Sri Ramakrishna's life and work being divine, sublime, profound, and fresh very easily finds a heightened expression in Sanskrit. *Sri Ramakrishna Charitam* is a nice Sanskrit poem in the *anushtup* metre and is undoubtedly a major contribution to the domain of Sanskrit literature in this century. It is also one of the few poetical works in Sanskrit on Sri Ramakrishna. The aesthetic sentiment and the art of composing the poem show the adeptness and the learning of the poet. This poem has eighteen cantos. Beginning from Sri Ramakrishna's childhood, all the phases of his life are distinctly narrated. The *anushtup* metre easily evokes the devotional mood, so this poem naturally touches the core of the reader's heart leaving a pleasant elevated feeling.

The following cantos depict the character and personality of Sri Ramakrishna: 'Balyam', 'Dakshinashvare Pujakah', 'Divyanubhutayah', 'Kamarapukure Vivaha', 'Avataratvam Dridhikritam', 'Advaita-

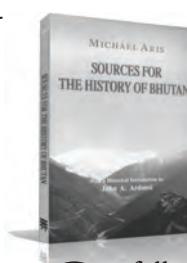
nubhavah', 'Dvaitadvaitabhava Samyogah', 'Islam-dharma Parichaya Tirtha Yatra Cha', 'Sarada-manih Dakshinashvare', 'Anyadharma Parichayah', 'Brahmasamajangasamparkah', 'Shishyanam Agamanam', 'Shishyanam Vaividhyam', 'Narendrasya Agamanam' 'Sannyasi Shishyah', 'Gurudevasya Dehasvasthyam', 'Mahasamadhih', and 'Sannyasimathasthapanam'.

Sri Saradamani, the consort of Sri Ramakrishna, was regarded as the embodiment of the goddess Kali by him. People from various walks of life like Keshav Sen, Trailokyanath, Devendranath, Mahendranath, Girishchandra, and those belonging to other religious sects were also very close to him. Young men like Narendra, Rakhal, Kaliprasad, Taraknath, Saratchandra, and Shashibhushan were his great disciples who established the Ramakrishna Order to propagate the teachings, culture, and religious thought of Sri Ramakrishna. To explain the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, the author has discussed 'Jaganmata', 'Vedanta Vichara', 'Oneness of Jiva and Parameshwara', 'Avidya Vichara', 'Jagat Mithya Vichara', and so on.

In a few instances the author has slightly violated the rules of the *anushtup* metre, otherwise the whole poem would have been more pleasant and melodious. A translation of the poem would have been a big help for novices and would also have become part of a collection in many more libraries and homes.

Dr Suchitra Ray Acharya
Reader in Sanskrit, Calcutta University

BOOK RECEIVED



**Sources for the History
of Bhutan**
Michael Aris

Motilal Banarsi Dass, 41 U A Bungalow
Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi
110 007. Website: www.mldb.com.
2009. xxii + 203 pp. ₹ 595.

Carefully choosing the source material for this comprehensive book the author shows the entire history of Bhutan. A historical introduction by Dr John A Ardussi enables readers to grasp the mystique that surrounds the land and its people.

REPORTS



*Srimat Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj inaugurating the
Swami Vivekananda ratha yatra at Asansol*

Commemoration of the 150th Birth Anniversary of Swami Vivekananda

Ramakrishna Mission, New Delhi, conducted an interfaith meet on 10 and 11 September 2011 in which 13 religious leaders of 9 faiths presented speeches. Each of these speeches was followed by an interactive question-answer session with the audience. Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, former president of India, delivered the inaugural address and Sheila Dikshit, chief minister of Delhi, gave the valedictory address. About 1,000 persons from various faiths attended the meet each day. Besides, the centre held an all-India online competition for school students. The first phase of the competition attracted 52,787 entries from 8,989 schools. Nearly 1,000 students were selected for the second phase.

At the initiative of **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Asansol**, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Bhava Prachar Parishad member ashramas in Burdwan district organized a twelve-day Vivekananda *ratha yatra* (procession of Swami Vivekananda chariot) at Asansol, Burdwan, and some nearby towns. Srimat Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurated the *yatra* on 19 September. Besides, the junction of the National Highway-2 and Vivekananda Sarani near the ashrama has been renamed

'Vivekananda Mor' (Vivekananda Junction) by Asansol Municipal Corporation. Srimat Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj unveiled the plaque on 19 September.

New Math Centre

Ramakrishna Math (Beni Pal Udyan), Sinthi, in Kolkata, which was so long under the direct supervision of Belur Math, has been made an independent branch centre of the Ramakrishna Math. Its address is Ramakrishna Math (Beni Pal Udyan), Sinthi, 13C, Samar Sarani, Kolkata 700 050; phone: (033) 25563817.

News from Branch Centres

On 30 July Swami Prabhananda, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, officiated at the Bhumi Puja (land purification) ceremony for the proposed multi-purpose building at the **Vedanta Centre of Sydney, Australia**.

The college of **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narendrapur**, held the concluding phase of its golden jubilee celebration on 3 August.

The newly built bookstall at **Ramakrishna Mission, Shillong**, was inaugurated on 7 August.

Ramakrishna Math, Vadodara, has put up a

bookstall at platform 1 of Vadodara Railway Station. It was inaugurated on 6 August.

Ramakrishna Math, Pune, launched a mobile bookstall on 28 August.

The renovated prayer hall of the Vidyarthi Mandiram (hostel) at **Ramakrishna Math, Bengaluru**, was inaugurated on 9 September.

On 12 September Srimat Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, released at the **Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Gol Park**, the 8th volume of the *Cultural Heritage of India*, published by the Institute.

The annual convocation of the **Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University, Belur**, for the faculties of Disability Management and Special Education and General and Adapted Physical Education and Yoga was held at the university's faculty centre of Coimbatore on 17 September, in which 185 and 231 successful candidates respectively of the above faculties were awarded degree and diploma certificates by Swami Prabhananda, who is also the chancellor of the university.

Srimat Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj inaugurated the newly built second floor of the Indian guest house at **Belur Math** on 22 September, the birthday of Swami Abhedananda.

At **Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Purulia**, Srimat Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj inaugurated the newly constructed children's park, swimming pool, and lawn tennis court on 25 September and the new block of monks' quarters on 28 September.

Srimat Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj laid the foundation stone for the proposed guest house at **Ramakrishna Math, Bagda**, on 25 September.

Achievements

The Central Board of Secondary Education has awarded Certificate of Merit to 8 students of

the school at **Ramakrishna Mission, Vivekanagar**, and to 63 class-10 students of the school at **Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Deoghar**, for obtaining grade A1 in all the five subjects—excluding additional 6th subject—in the All India Secondary School Examination 2010. The board also awarded Certificate of Merit to a class-12 tribal student of the school at **Ramakrishna Mission, Narottam Nagar**, for outstanding academic performance and for being among the top 0.1 % of successful candidates of the All India Senior Secondary Certificate Examination 2011 in chemistry. The same student has also obtained the 1st and 2nd ranks in Arunachal Pradesh Joint Entrance Examinations 2011 for medical and engineering streams respectively.

Two students of the school at **Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Deoghar**, have received National Merit Scholarship for their excellent performance in the National Talent Search Examination 2011 conducted by National Council of Educational Research and Training. Besides, Nilanjan Ghosh Dastidar and Shwetank Sharan, students of the Vidyapith, secured first and second ranks respectively at the State Level Science Seminar Contest 2011, organized at Ranchi by the state of Jharkhand jointly with Birla Industrial and Technological Museum, Kolkata.

Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University, Belur, was awarded Ananya Samman Puraskar (Unique Honour Prize) by 24-Ghanta, a Bengali news channel, at a function held in Kolkata on 8 August, for its unique features and specialized programmes for the underprivileged and the marginalized. The award consists of a citation and 90,000 rupees. Besides, Swami Vidyanathananda, a monk of the university, has been awarded the prestigious Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar prize for the year 2011 in the area of mathematical sciences. Named after the founder

director of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, it is a distinction conferred upon scientists below the age of 45 for outstanding contributions to science and technology.

Winshaphistha Dien, a class-7 student of the school at **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Cherrapunjee**, secured the state level first prize for her project 'Mathematics in Nature' in the national level exhibition and project competition organized by the Department of Science & Technology, Government of India, New Delhi, from 14 to 16 August.

Dr T S Suryanarayanan, research scientist at the Vivekananda Institute of Tropical Mycology of the **Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Chennai**, has discovered fungi that can withstand a temperature of 100–115 degrees Celsius. The discovery of these fungi, which are among the most heat-resistant eukaryotes—organisms with a membrane-bound nucleus—on record, is considered a major breakthrough in biotechnology.

Pranav Kumar Potai, a student of the school at **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narainpur**, who passed class 12 in 2009, has been awarded Dr Ambedkar Foundation Merit Award for his excellent result (92.17% marks) in class-10 examination conducted by Chhattisgarh Board in 2007. The award carries a sum of 40,000 rupees.

Relief

Flood Relief . Heavy, incessant rains in some parts of Odisha during September caused widespread floods that affected thousands of families in the state. The Mission's three branch centres in Odisha conducted primary relief work among flood-affected families. **Bhubaneswar** centre distributed 13,255 kg gram flour and 5,663 kg biscuits among 9,200 flood-affected families of 48 villages in 6 blocks of Jajpur and Cuttack districts. **Puri Math** distributed 3,500 kg chira, 175 kg molasses, 70 kg milk powder, biscuits, soap bars, detergent powder, 1,400 mosquito coils, and

other items among 700 flood-affected families of Satyabadi and Puri Sadar blocks in Puri district. **Puri Mission** distributed 14,795 kg chira, 892 kg sugar, 250 kg biscuits, 84 kg milk powder, 2,544 candles, and 1,800 matchboxes among 2,959 flood-affected families of 30 villages in Gop and Delanga blocks of Puri district. In West Bengal, **Malda** centre continued its primary relief work among the flood-affected people of Malda district distributing 6,100 kg rice, 731 kg dal, 1,024 kg biscuits, 6,716 kg chira, 3,500 kg salt, 548 kg edible oil, 1,636 kg milk powder, 2,300 kg potatoes, 920 saris, 230 dhotis, and 257 lungis among 352 flood-affected families of 12 villages in Ratua and Harishchandrapur blocks of the district. **Swami Vivekananda's Ancestral House** distributed 200 saris and 200 dhotis to flood-affected people of Athpur and Manipur villages in Sandeshkhali-II block of North 24-Parganas district.

Distress Relief . The following centres distributed various items to needy people. **Baranagar Math**: 430 saris, 40 dhotis, and 180 children's garments; **Belgharia**: 3,532 saris, 2,688 dhotis, 203 lungis, 2,717 shirts, 2,592 pants, 1,050 frocks, 1,382 women's garments, 1,469 woollen garments, and 2,408 blankets among 2,245 families in 6 blocks of Hooghly, Paschim Medinipur, Purba Medinipur, and Purulia districts; **Malda**: 500 saris and 200 children's garments; **Nagpur**: 1,011 school uniforms, 3,033 notebooks, and 1,011 pens to 1,011 needy students of 22 schools; **Naora**: 140 saris, 400 lungis, and 265 children's garments; **Rajkot**: 3,000 kg wheat flour, 1,500 kg khichudi, 150 kg edible oil, 75 kg spices, 150 kg sugar, 30 kg tea, and 300 chaddars among families affected by heavy rainfall in Bhuj district; **Silchar**: 912 dhotis and 1,189 saris; **Vrindaban**: 800 kg rice, 800 kg wheat flour, 400 kg salt, 200 kg mustard oil, 200 kg dal, and 100 kg sugar. In September **Lucknow Sevashrama** provided vitamin A capsules to 3,173 underprivileged school children and free glasses to 52 of them who had refractory errors.

Rehabilitation Relief . 16 houses built by **Purulia** centre for needy people at Jhalda, Purulia district, in collaboration with the government of West Bengal, were formally handed over to the beneficiaries on 5 September.